

WAKING

DAVID SWARBRICK

THE
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FOR JEROME

These 20 Shorts, neither
haiku, dodoitsu, tanka, or
waka, but brief, suggestive
and mildly objective all the
same, were written in a
moment between 6.30 and
7.30 am in bed on 5th
January 2026, with thanks
to Jerome, whose biography
of Basho I glimpsed and
loved.

1

Waking, I dream of
the raggedy, tattered ends
of magic, and the white house
beneath flamboyant trees.

2

How could the others
ever count, or hook the leash
I lash on this,
the best, the oldest, biggest -
titanic rock of all.

3

I can read the torn photograph,
small boy climbing from the big car
beneath frangipani trees.

4

On the dinner party's lawns
the massive ice blocks
are almost melted.
The dawn is cold.
Crows caw.

5

It was a child's instant garden -
crotons, shrubs, tree leaves
plucked, plugged into a square
of watered earth
the Mali made.

6

It is something about the bricks I remember,
the way monsoon rain had eroded them
on the terrace above the Adyar,
the old deposed queen
listening - in her rattan chair -
to a transistor.

7

Really, nothing at all is missing.
The aisles of this supermarket stock
everything you might ever need.
Also, plastic Buddhas.

8

Gunshot frightens the dogs
but it is only monkeys, angry farmers.
Before, it was whole villages,
bordered by a telltale circle
of impaled sawn-off heads.

9

As always
she is come to fetch me,
an angel with neither wings nor face
waiting in the airport's arrivals hall,
the railway platform,
even the quay.

10

At night, my dog sleeps
on my head,
a bomb helmet
that licks and loves.
Whatever else could I really need?

I am guessing now which way is north,
and which the jungle hills
submerged by the invading army
a thousand years before.

12

It is such a sly and easy trick to play -
that nothing matters very much
when a few things matter most.

13

Waking -
AC still on,
door open,
a brown capped babbler calling -
my mind too still, too calm
to bother with small niggardly things.

14

Pub outing, dinner party,
an excursion to the shopping mall,
cinema jaunt,
a junket meet-up after work.
It is all entrapment, is it not?
A forgetting of God?

One dog licks another
who licks right back.
They are mother and daughter.
On and off,
they will do this for hours.
Could we?

16

The tea that Wiji brought
is cooling fast.
I have spent too long in bed
cuddling the dogs,
being immortal.

17

It will not come together -
the thought,
like four sides of a perfect square
that do not - quite – meet up.

Lost now, but for this archive.
Outside the chatter of bulbuls,
of ordinary birds.

This, all this is my tally -
unlike yours, and otherwise quite the same -
the difference all in how we remember;
the long day burdened with the scent
of sapu flowers.

They had no daughters,
just sons who could not speak,
theirs being a silent house,
one of several, the families
lapping against each other
like tiny waves, recalling
the last movements of a great storm
out at sea.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, art and marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com. The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

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A small island surrounded by large oceans, Sri Lanka is a mystery to many: remote, hard to place; a well-kept secret.

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