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REEF

Romesh Gunesekera

New Press, 190 pp., $20.00

by Neil Gordon

In contemporary London, a Sri Lankan man stops at a gas station, pumps his gas, goes to pay. In the face of the boy in the cashier's booth, he sees a great familiarity, "almost a reflection" of his own. It is night, they are alone, and although compatriots, their only common language is English, of which the boy speaks little: the man is Sinhala, the boy Tamil, the two sides of their country's long civil war.

As they exchange a few words inside the lighted booth, the Sinhala envisages the Tamil's home, Silavatturai, "[o]nce a diver's paradise. Now a landmark for gunrunners in a battle zone of army camps and Tigers." Then the Tamil boy closes shop, flicking off the lights, and as the stars appear beyond the window in a London winter, the Sinhala experiences a long fugue of memory that transports him 30 years and 6000 miles away to his boyhood on an island off the southwest coast of India called until 1972, Ceylon.

Romesh Gunesekera's acclaimed first novel, *Reef* -- shortlisted for the Booker Prize in Gunesekera's adopted country, England -- is this Sinhala man's narration in flashback of his life, from his boyhood to young adulthood. It is a servant's life that he tells us: as a boy, Triton is steered into the service of Mister Salgado, a bourgeois Sinhala intellectual from a landowning family. At first he is a houseboy on a staff of three, but before long, with his cool efficiency, he supplants the other two, becoming Mister Salgado's cook and caretaker.

Over perhaps ten years Triton becomes indispensable to Mister Salgado and when, some time in the 70s, mounting Tamil terrorism forces Mister Salgado into exile, there is no question but that Triton, by now attending to all of Mister Salgado's domestic needs, will go with him. It is after twenty years in London that Triton stops at a gas station in Mister Salgado's car and meets the young Tamil refugee. But those twenty years in England are only briefly described: Triton is concerned with narrating, in detail, the ten years or so he lived with Mister Salgado in Sri Lanka.

Mister Salgado, in '60s Sri Lanka, is a marine biologist, and his tracking of the island's protective coral reef's slow destruction by pollution and over-fishing provides the title and central metaphor for this story -- set, as we will very soon understand it to be, in a world heading for self-destruction. He is a kind man, and while he accepts without question the social hierarchy of his household -- Triton's first job is to serve Mister Salgado his morning tea in bed -- still Triton is never so much subservient to a master as he is respectful of a teacher.

Triton is a deeply creative and intelligent boy -- the descriptions of his cooking and quiet command over the houshold are some of the novel's most satisfying passages -- with some education, and he's smart enough to learn everything Mister Salgado can teach: "...I watched him, I watched him unendingly, all the time, and learned to become what I am." He learns his habits, the intimate details of his tastes for clothes and food; watches his work, listens to his coversations with his friends. When Mister Salgado travels on his marine studies, Triton travels with him. When, ultimately, Mister Salgado will go into exile, Triton will go with him. And when Mister

Salgado falls in love with Miss Nili and so undergoes the great -- the only -- sentimental education of his life, Triton, never transgressing his observer's distance, falls in love with her too.

So far, it sounds like we're dealing with an essentially domestic tale, and that's true. But only to a point: there is another perspective within the narration that breaks the unity of the very young houseboy's view; Gunesekera insists on injecting references to the evolving disaster of Sri Lankan politics in the late '60s and early '70s. Of course, since independence from Britain in 1948 -- and even more so since the 1956 de-anglicizing of the country by the Sri Lankan Freedom Party, which so fatally decided on Sinhala as the national language -- these politics are always immediately present in the story. This is a place on the verge of massive political upheaval, with social inequities and ideological rifts deep enough to find expression in terrorism, and then in decades of civil war. And yet when Gunesekera refers to the historical or political, always within the narrative point of view of this young boy, the integrity of the book's voice seems broken. Describing Mister Salgado's cook, he writes

> She had served Mister Salgado's grandfather whisky and coffee during the riots of 1915. She had seen politicians with handlebar moustaches and tortoiseshell topknots, morning coats and gold threaded sarongs, barefoot and church-shod. She had seen monkey suits give way to Nehru shirts; Sheffield silver replaced by coconut spoons.

Instances of terrorist violence, too, rock the placidity of Mister Salgado's household, a violence that not only in its occurrence but in its very nature is a harbinger of change.

> There were no death squads then, no thugs so callous in their killing that they felt no pleasure until they saw someone twitch against a succession of bullets. In my childhood no one dreamed of leaving a body to rot where it had been butchered, as people have had to learn to do more recently.

This is no doubt perfectly true, and a sense of the tragedy, the brute waste of the violence that will soon tear this island paradise apart, does inform the text. And yet, Gunesekera never really manages to make it an organic part of Triton's story. "I was trapped inside what I could see, what I could hear, what I could walk to without straying from my undefined boundaries, and in what I could remember from...my mud-walled school." So centrally important, to the narrative voice, is this limitation that the political observations -- of the cook's background, of the growth of terrorism -- no matter how beautifully written, feel tendentiously imposed on the text instead of implicit to it, as if the author, more than the characters, feels the importance of the march of history on his plot. And it feels labored, as if, doubting the inherent dramatic interest of Triton's domestic life, the author were stretching for a Naipaul-esque relevancy to his story. And in fact there are strong commonalities with Naipaul. There is the long reach of the British Empire, and there is the brutal irony of independence leading to violence beyond that which the British imposed. Gunesekera captures, like Naipaul, the peculiarly apt blend of British formality and tropical fecundity, as if the cold cultural eye of the English made even more movingly colorful the parrots, gekkos, orioles -- the "promise of cinnamon, pepper, clove" in this "jungle of demons"; the "perpetual embrace of the shore and the sea, bounded by a fretwork of undulating coconut trees, pure unadorned forms framing the seascape into a kaleidoscope of bluish jewels" -- of the island paradises they corrupted or, Gunesekera will suggest, were corrupted by.

But the prose is too original to allow much comparison. The story relies less on Naipaul-like telling detail than on the nostalgia, the regret that the prose captures in structure as well as subject, a careful progression of exactly

described venues, like photographs of the past, a succession of tableaux more than a sequence of dramatic scenes. It seems forged in the timelessness of the tropical noon, etched on the eye by the sun. And the sensation is carried down to the nicest decisions of syntax, when in its subtlest and most impressive moments the language conjures a temporal suspension in its rhythms, constantly throwing the reader off guard in his expectation of lyricism with an unexpected word. This is wholly original, very ambitious language, and it is often, like the descriptions, exquisite.

> Most of all I missed the closeness of the . . . reservoir. The lapping of the dark water, flapping lotus leaves, the warm air rippling over it and the cormorants rising, the silent glide of the hornbill. And then those very still moments when the world would stop and only colour move like the blue breath of dawn lightening the sky, or the darkness of night misting the globe; a colour, a ray of curved light and nothing else.

As the book progresses, it is the prose rather than the wider political framework that involves the reader, the power of the descriptions and the emotional complexity of Triton's world that carry the story, and the wider perspective begins to seem less relevant. And that's difficult, to dismiss the central, tragic injustice of the political turmoil that is engulfing Sri Lanka as less important than a servant's domestic tale.

But emotional realities are what this book, in its perceptive, quiet voice, is most convincingly about. Of course the "distant thunder" of political events is always present, and often foregrounded: when it becomes loud enough, Triton and Mister Salgado go into exile. But in the continuum of Triton's consciousness, as it is here narrated, Gunesekera fails to assign these exterior political events a believable place. Of course the historic tragedy of Sri Lanka is implicit to the story -- so implicit, perhaps, that Gunesekera's explicit insistance weakens its importance. History may be a nightmare in which Gunesekera is struggling to entrap us, and yet no matter how often these political realities are referred to, they never become as relevant as the more immediate, more compelling emotional realities of the story.

Nowhere is this better shown than in *Reef*'s central scene, the Christmas dinner that Mister Salgado hosts, and which will usher in his love affair with Miss Nili.

The preparation, serving, and consuming of the meal at Salgado's house -- eight to dine with Miss Nili -- compose the most sustained dramatic seqence of the book. Sitting at the middle of the story, the action of the dinner scene proceeds with sure logic, rising tension, and entire believability. And within its pace Gunesekera is able to make us understand something about the place he comes from, beyond its meticulously described locales, and far beyond its distant politics. As Triton listens to Mister Salgado talking to his guests, he is "spellbound."

> I could see the whole of our world come to life when he spoke.... The past resurrected in a pageant of long-haired princes clutching ebony rods; red-tailed mermaids; elephants adorned with tasselled canopies and silver bells raising their sheathed, gilded, curved tusks and circling the bronze painted cities of ancient warlords. His words conjured up adventurers from India north and south, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British, each with their flotillas of disturbed hope and manic wanderlust. They had come full of the promise of cinnamon, pepper, clove, and found a refuge in this jungle of demons and vast quiet waters.

The tensions between the characters at the table -- all revolving around Miss Nili -- come as dramatically clear as the perfectly-cooked turkey cleanly parting from the bone under Mister Salgado's knife.

> Perfume rose up from her, and when I moved in to spoon the potatoes on to her plate it seemed the scent was stronger. It rose up from below her throat down inside her flapping dress. She had her elbows on the table her body was concave. She must have smeared the perfume with her fingers, rubbing it in like honey paste to enrich the skin.... My sarong, tight around my hips, brushed her arm. She didn't notice. She was looking across the table. Robert had caught her eye; he was smiling, his head shyly cocked to one side. A piece of turkey tumbled from her fork. She quickly retrieved it and said, 'Jesus.'

Everything is here: the American Robert's attraction to Nili that will later cause Salgado's fit of jealousy and Nili's flight; Triton's deep attraction to Nili; the insistence on the British trappings of mashed potatoes and turkey that, with all it represents, has thrown this island country into permanent political turmoil; the deeply-felt background of jungle myths and generations of colonialists. An entire narrative at this pace, with this sure subtlety of touch, might sacrifice some of Gunesekera's description, as well as analysis, but in exchange it would gain a terrific level of intensity, and the payoff in terms of emotions it could encompass would be huge.

A writer who would have made this dinner his whole story is Joyce, and the result would be, like that other story of an evening's entertainment, "The Dead," both a classic of English language but also cinematic enough for John Huston to make it a film. Gunesekera is the only contemporary writer I have encountered good enough to do the same. The perceptive, thrilling drama of his narration seems to burst the limits of his framing device, a tribute to the power of his story. I look forward to reading every word he writes, not only for the pleasure of following one of the two or three best writers I've encountered among my contemporaries, but also in the hopes of seeing his stories escape his rather tendentious narrative bias toward literary relevance and speak more simply and dramatically for themselves.

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