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Maya Jaggi on a mythical reimagining of Sri Lanka in Heaven's Edge by Romesh Gunsekera



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Heaven's Edge

Romesh Gunsekera

206pp, Bloomsbury, £16.99

Despoiled paradises and desecrated Edens have always been at the heart of Romesh Gunsekera's subtle and often elegiac fiction. Heaven's Edge, his most powerful and compelling novel to date, recreates the mythic fall in the Edenic garden. It shockingly reimagines his birthplace, Sri Lanka, as an unnamed tropical Asian island in the near future: familiar yet disturbing, magical and pervasively violent, a post-nuclear dystopia peopled by traumatised orphans and rebel eco-warriors.

The narrator, Marc, a Londoner who has spent his life within earshot of Heathrow airport, puts his belongings in storage and heads for the "emerald island" that his grandfather, Eldon, had left to come to Britain before the second world war. Marc's life is shrivelled by loss: of his father, Lee, an RAF pilot shot down on a mysterious mission to the island when Marc was small; of his mother, an Englishwoman who committed suicide after her husband's death; of his grandfather, who died when he was 12; and of his grandmother, Cleo, a "strong, quiet woman" from a Caribbean island, who brought him up. Their coffins have vanished "behind a motorised curtain in a succession of heartbreak, suicide and old age; the flames of my father's aircraft, falling, flaring behind each of them, again and again".

Marc, despite antecedents in four continents, has lived an "ultra-cautious" life, believing trails of migration are cruel or futile; that he should stay close to home. But the discovery of an antiquated video of his father spurs a quest. He lands on his grandfather's island by moonlight, a "man in search of his father, or perhaps in search of himself". The only guest at a seaside tourist hotel in this postwar trouble spot, he finds the erstwhile land of ancient ruined cities, cool tea hills and coconut plantations enduring a "peace" imposed by terror.

There are beach executions, hi-tech surveillance and compulsory sterilisation of rebels. Yearning for somewhere to "keep faith" with, Marc finds Uva, an eco-warrior, releasing emerald doves into the air - symbols of a green peace amid ecological devastation. Like other "secret farmers", her goal is biodiversity in soil depleted not only by scorched-earth warfare but by past imperial cash crops and "coconut kings". For Marc, "All I wanted from my life, from everything around me and before me, coalesced into her."

His safe world shatters when soldiers, for whom food is a weapon of war, destroy Uva's farm and capture him. On his quest to find her again, Marc meets Jaz, an effeminate barfly, and Kris, a taciturn killer who Marc fears is Uva's former lover. Their journey takes them through a prefab concrete town atop ruins, a subterranean shopping mall

built for tourists and now an almost mythical underworld, a solar-powered cliff-top palace, and a struggling sanctuary for birds and butterflies to which Marc descends in a peacock-shaped glider - only to find his fragile "little Eden" menaced.

War and pacifism, and the dilemma of killing for personal and national freedom, are probed in a novel that contains Gunsekera's most explicit violence. Marc's love for Uva - his Eve - brings a fall, as he recognises her truth: that "sometimes you have to sacrifice your innocence to protect this world that you care so much for".

The island's history is left vague - a "past choked with wars, disputes, borders as pointless as chalk lines in water" - as are its competing ideologies. Yet as armed conflict abates in the real Sri Lanka, the novel obliquely questions what peace can mean in a country riven by almost 20 years of war. The separate traumas that create distance between the reunited lovers are like those of a divided land, where "too many deaths had blotched our separate lives to allow for a simple return to our beginnings".

Through mythic imagery of freedom, flight and rebirth, multiple themes resonate without being forced: migration and settlement, love and loss, the fragility of dreams and of the innocence lost to preserve them. A landscape almost hallucinogenic in its abundance is matched by a lushness of language, with images of flying fish, blue plumbago shrub and wild aubergines, and the scent of citrus and citronella. In a book that confirms the vivid originality of its author's vision, Gunsekera has created a palpable, terrifying world that, for all the precariousness of its beauty, harbours love and hope.