

READING LESSON

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Some girls on a beach.

Warm, sweet, water laps their thighs.

Peals of laughter frozen in the photographic moment; shrieks shrill as the sourest pangs someday to pierce these hearts.

Over the horizon life and 'O' levels await.

The camera makes a moment out of time, but by no means timeless. You can tell by the hemlines we're somewhere in the mini-skirted, psychedelic seventies (fashions arrive belatedly in these parts).

And the place? Now the clues are fewer. An island nation, aren't we, warm sea and palm trees everywhere? Beaches are our thing. Though not as much, believe me, as they are going to be. No giant coaches, nor pale, sagging flesh in evidence, yet. (What's that phrase: Thailand for girls, Sri Lanka for...

Stop it, please. Just stop there. We've established that it's not that time. Yet.)

But the place? A beach, yes, but where?

Knowing your fashions can take you only so far. There's no help to be got, for instance, by eyeing those roll-neck collars and elbow-long sleeves. That's what we wore then, regardless of heat and humidity, no questions asked. (An image stored irrevocably in the memory, to surface, against the odds, just here, just now: P--- P---, father returned last week from London, in ivory mini dress and peacock-blue nylon tights, sweatily resplendent at the CMS fair.)

Quit stalling. The place?

Give up? This is Miss Ratnanayagam's fifth form on the annual excursion to Jaffna.

Immediately the beach demands another look.

The image remains the same, almost. Some girls. A beach. But an island nation? Not quite, not even then, though bicycle murders and gun battles were (like tourist coaches) still around the corner. But surely there is some knowledge in the air, some intimation? Soon, very soon, the brother of one of the girls outside the photo's frame will be arrested for a bank robbery, will flee to India, will return clandestinely to fight, and soon after that, by all accounts, to die.

But it's part of the story, too, that this girl is not in the photo. What she could tell about this place, this beach, that shining afternoon, would alter the picture irrevocably. If she were in it, this would be another photo. It would not be in my album, would not be being contemplated by me, in Sydney, in the centenary year of our (though more mine than hers) old school.

So – no intimation? No unspoken knowledge?

Girls: names to thread on a many-coloured necklace: Muthulakshmi, Kamalini, Shyami, Prabha, Vanusha. Juliana. From these names alone, or the tangle of limbs, hair and miniskirts in the photo, you can't always tell who is what. One day this was, and will be again, incredibly important, literally a matter of life or death. But not quite now. Not yet. Though there are hints and portents. There are whispers abroad that *those* girls are not mixing enough. Even Miss R, ever faithful to her role, admonishes: you lot are sticking together like the seven sisters.

If truth be told, and pictorial evidence to the contrary, in Jaffna I am a fish out of water. Or, to switch metaphors, I'm not a fish at all, but I am no fowl either. Jaffna is a place I know in broken webs of story that do not hold together. First, my mother's world of well baths and baroque family trees, where *first-bed* and *second-bed* interweave with serial *intermarriages* in fantastic combinations. Then there's the easily recognizable, partly buffoonish, partly sinister, figure who *Comes From Jaffna*, a character to disown at any price. Beyond these is an unknown Jaffna, whose inflections are irretrievably foreign, unintelligible. The tiny "Tamil Stream" in our class excursion cannot but approach Jaffna with ambivalence: it is ours and not ours, a place we recognize and deny. In Australia now there's a term for it: *the cultural cringe*. Against the presumed sophistication of Colombo, Jaffna plays the role of the provincial, the hidebound and (dare I say it?) the colonial.

(Remember that morning in the back garden? *You don't look like a Tamil girl.*)

Some day I might run into *her* at the airport, in Rome, or perhaps in some obscure North American college town, teaching (what else?) postcolonial literature. Maybe *she's* an affluent matron in Singapore, looking for a visa to the West before her son turns eighteen? A nurse in Qatar? One day will I see *her* in the pages of *Machang* or *Hello* magazine, grand proprietor of a private island adored by film stars and presidents? Then there are the girls I have no likelihood of ever meeting again, those girls outside the frame of the photo, though *her* everyday life, or *hers*, may not be so different from mine, in Sydney or Helsinki, Toronto or Chennai. But we live in different diasporas. If we chance to glimpse each other across the aisles of an Indo-Fijian supermarket in Homebush, our glances will quickly diverge, in indifference or distaste, fear or recognition. There is nothing, there is too much, to say: it comes to the same thing.

Girls frolic on a beach. Tomorrow two of us (I remember clearly which two, but I'm not telling) will be told to let down our hemlines. This is Jaffna, after all, and tomorrow we visit St John's, Chundukuli, our sister school in the Anglican order of things (though St John's and Chundukuli, in fact, are far older than the upstart Ladies' College, who only now is approaching the dignity of three figures). Except for one more visit five years later, for the burial of my grandmother's ashes, transported from Colombo, in the church yard of St John's, I will not see this landscape again.

My grandfather, a peoples' warden of this Church for twenty-five years, and my young uncle flank Amamma. They died together, father and son, in an epidemic. *Enteric*, an antiquated name for typhoid, stamps them with a Victorian distance. Various other relatives, maternal and paternal, are arranged around. If I can claim roots in any place, this must be it. But strange how my memory of this final visit, even with the knowledge I have now, remains less vivid than the schoolgirl junket.

On the night before Amamma's memorial service we stayed in the same precinct, but at the Principal's residence at St John's, my cousin Anandarajah's house. In a few more years he too will die, murdered, incredible to contemplate, in the ola-fenced streets of this ancestral town. And even more preposterous the reason for his killing. He dies, as far as we can tell, for having the temerity to arrange a cricket match between the Sri Lankan army and St John's College boys. This improbable reason for his death is the reason that his story too is part of the photo, cannot be left out of it. Like cricket, Miss Ratnanayagam's fifth form excursion to

Jaffna tells something about the old school and what it asked us to believe about ourselves and about the world.

In our family album this photo, of girls on a beach somewhere in Jaffna, mirrors another one taken almost a decade earlier when my cousin, a young housemaster then, brought a group from St John's to breakfast at our house. They are on their way to Adam's Peak, a final rite of passage as they step outside the world of school in Jaffna. Here I am at six or seven, finger in astonished mouth, wondering, perhaps, to find myself in a family group with a crowd of sixth-form boys. They sport a variety of styles, got up to face the unknown up-country. The rush in their almost grown-up voices, the imagined beat of the drum one holds as another reaches to play it, provide the unheard soundtrack.



This photo must have its counterparts in scores of family albums in transplanted households in Sydney and Helsinki, London and Toronto. Perhaps they went up in flames in Colombo in 1983 or floated away in the serial evacuations of Jaffna. Or were some simply ripped apart in anguished protest against a future so divergent from its early promises?

Can the failures and aspirations of photos like these be acknowledged in the official stories of my school and others? I am asking too much, I know; *reading too much* into Miss Ratnanayagam's yearly trip to introduce the fifth form to Jaffna. But the photos are material evidence of a set of beliefs, misplaced, misguided (shall we call them delusions?) about ourselves: who we were, where we belonged, about our making as future citizens and

subjects of our island nation -- yes, I know, we've done that bit already, but was there a moment when you could say *our island nation* and mean it? Isn't that what these island-encircling travels were about? Or is Miss Ratnanayagam's annual excursion to *Jaffna* already the evidence of the failure of that grand fiction, the island nation?

It is Saturday afternoon in my photo. Early on Sunday morning R---- H-----'s grandparents will arrive to visit us in our dorm at Chundukuli. A cream cracker tin packed with milk toffees, which we all share around. And other things too.

For three days now, in a spectacular act of disavowal, I have refused to drink the water that tastes like tears. Stubbornly I have kept going on Vimto and Orange Barley. Perhaps this accounts for my heightened, feverish memories of the final day and night: cigarettes, rumours of forbidden thrills and cuddles? Did two of us really walk into a shop and walk out again with a ring we didn't pay for? Was it *her* and *her*, those entwined shapes in the darkness of the dorm room? And, am I certain I hear, or do I imagine, as the *Yaal Devi* rattles its way back into Fort Station, beneath the rattle of the rails, under the raunchy singing in three languages, an imperceptible vibration, grating, incessant, like the hiss of an untuned radio, like an exhalation of some unspeakable emotion: the frequency of fear?

Some girls frolic on a beach.

Over the horizon life lies in wait.

Peals of sweet laughter frozen in the photographic moment; shrieks shrill as the sharpest pains some day to pierce these hearts.



Born in Sri Lanka, SUVENDRINI KANAGASABAI PERERA completed her PhD at Columbia University, New York, and now lives in the port city of Fremantle, Australia. She is Research Professor of Cultural Studies in the School of Media Culture & Creative Arts and Deputy Director of the Australia-Asia-Pacific Institute at Curtin University. Perera is the author/editor of six books, including *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats and Bodies* (2009). Her research interests include histories of coexistence, state violence, and diaspora cultural studies. She is working on a book on trophy war images titled *Old Atrocities, New Media*