

Death of Esthappan

Author(s): Mathew Chacko

Source: *Chicago Review*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1994), pp. 10-25

Published by: Chicago Review

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25305796>

Accessed: 21-05-2025 20:04 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Chicago Review is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Chicago Review*

Death of Esthappan

The old man is having a bad dream and it wakes me up. For the fourth night in a row. Is it fair? You tell me. Not a *paisa* in wages, three meals a day for ten hours of work, and on top of it a *maisthri*¹ whose brains are beginning to rot.

Some kind of demons are chasing him through his sleep. They catch him around four every night. It's the worst time to be woken up. I'm sleeping like a tired bride. I've sailed across the cup of the bay, past the outflung arm of the white sandbar. The orange potbellied buoys I've left far behind. So too Lakshwadeep, and a dozen other islands whose names I don't even know. I'm in the middle of pure ocean, bobbing like a navel on the sea's roundness. Water winking all around, empty acres of sky overhead. Who needs yoga and mantra, or twenty-three lifetimes of good deeds? Sand wood for ten hours, warp beams over the pitfire for half a day, come home and unroll your sleeping mat, and you have a good chance at reaching nirvana. If you can find a cool spot and a soft pillow, that is.

First thing I do when I get home? I turn on the tap in the yard and collect buckets and buckets of water. I soak the four walls of our one-room house. The *maisthri* goes straight to the *Bhagavathi*² temple after work. He breaks a coconut at the deity's feet and, holding the lobes of his ears, circles Her thrice. On his knees, mind you. Scrapes them raw every time. As for me, I circle the house, hurling wave after wave at the unplastered walls.

1. *Maisthri*: A master craftsman. There is a mystique about these traditional figures in Kerala.

2. *Bhagavathi*: A Keralan version of Goddess Kali.

The heat steams up like spirits exorcised. It's four or five rounds before the bricks even darken a shade.

I use the plastic mug to lay some coolness up on the parched tile roof. Feeling, as I do, like the *yogi* of Adoor: the one who makes water disappear. He's seen it with his own two eyes, Preman claims. The *yogi* standing in the middle of the dusty courtyard, tossing up handfuls of the liquid, not a drop of which even thinks of coming down. Wind, I tell Preman. No wind can carry off that much water, he says. True or false, I tell him, it's a useless trick. Same category as the shrimp exporter's dog that smokes corona cigars. Now, if the *yogi* could bring down some rain from the sky, we could have sold him to the Arabs, at least.

On really hot days, I carry our rolled up mats, the *maisthri*'s battered trunk and my rexine suitcase, the two tool bags, and the stove we hardly use, out to the yard. I empty two buckets on the cement floor.

It's the *maisthri*'s good fortune to come home every night to a cool spot. And it's my shoulder that hurts. The thanks I get for it? Four nights in a row, he wrecks my sleep. I'm lolling on a blue ocean and he begins to keen like a new widow. What do you think it does? The empty acres shrink, just like that, to a smelly pocket of air. I am back in this tin-box of a room that is rolling with the clouds of sourness he puts out.

Today, when I wake up, the first thing I see is a black ant staggering up the wall a foot from my face. He is carrying a grain of sand on his back and the load is blowing him about. He takes two steps, then scatters sideways. A grain of sand, I tell you. It's more stupidity than I can bear. Before I do anything, I pull out the vest I had stuffed into my pillowcase and whip him off the wall.

The smell in the room is not just sweat, or the damp reed mat I'm lying on. When I turn around, I see, by the low-watt bulb he keeps on through the night, the wet patch on the front of his *lungi*.³ The best boat builder yet in the entire state, not a German or a Japanese who can even come close, Preman says. Those imported engineers—they draw and plan and calculate, add and divide to the eighth decimal point. The *maisthri* leans against a heap of logs, just runs his hand over one or two of them, and six months later a boat is floating in the river. A hundred foot *chundan* that is such perfection from the top of its up-curved stern to the tip of its last oar blade, that it makes people burst into tears. Just to see a past wonder like that return to the backwaters of this state.

A master and a magician, to hear Preman talk. Three parts poet, two

3. *Lungi*: A colorful, less expensive and less formal version of a *dhoti*.

parts *yogi*, and God's golden adze from head to foot. The luck of your birth hour, Preman tells me, to be his disciple. The power of your planet that of all the boys to place a *dakshina* at his feet and ask with folded hands, he picked you.

What is he doing now, God's golden adze? Sitting bolt upright on his mat, his legs stretched out in front of him, shivering like a *kavadi*⁴ dancer in the last stage of his trance. His eyes have rolled back in his head and all you can see are the whites, except at the very tops, where the merest black crescents are quivering.

"*Maisthri!*" I call. "*Maisthri!* Wake up!"

A sane voice in my head is telling me this: get up and go to the beach. Find a good spot on the boat, where the curve of the hull suits your spine. When Preman comes to the beach at noon, return with him to check. Why hang around this senselessness?

Just then this happens: the *maisthri* crashes backward. His head misses the pillow and sounds like a rotten melon against the floor. His navel begins to yearn toward the roof. Out of his mouth, spit bubbles up like clusters of transparent fish eggs. Get up and go to the beach, the sane voice is shouting in my ear.

What do I do, fool that I am? I jump up and run to where the house key is hanging on the wall. I pull it free, so hard the nail flies out and goes skittering across the room. I grab the *maisthri*'s arm and force open his fist. I press the iron key into his palm. Because I've heard this is the best remedy for fits.

What happens? His hand closes on mine like a trap. The rest of him is still in a trance, but his right hand is awake and in this world. And from the way it is crushing my fingers, the intent is not good. He is arching upwards and honeycombs of spit are still forming at the corners of his mouth, but all that is just the bait, I'm thinking now. The calf tied yonder side of the disguised pit. It's my hand he's after.

The thing that spills a fresh fear in my stomach? How does a half-starved specimen like him have this kind of strength? If there are two planks to lift, don't I take the heavier one? Why, despite the knee I am putting to his bony wrist and the weight I'm bringing down on it, can't I pull free of his grasp?

What do you do when a snake rears up in your path? You pick up the nearest stick and bring it down on him. You beat him and you beat him till

4. *Kavadi*: A very loosely-choreographed, costumed possession dance in which the dancer often goes into a trance.

your horror runs out. I draw back my free hand and slap the *maisthri* across the face. His flesh is slack against my palm, and with each slap there is a sound like fresh dung hitting the floor. It does no good, so I jump up, but he hinges at the waist, neatly as any door, and comes with me. I put my foot against his shoulder and push him back. It takes that—his arm on the verge of popping out—to convince him to let me go.

I am panting, and blood beats in my eyeballs, but standing there and watching, I can see his pupils returning. I can see him oozing back like water filling up a footprint. It startles me, I tell you. One minute you are looking down at the blank white belly of a turned over turtle, not one feature there, just plain dough breathing in a round pot, the next moment, he has somehow managed to right himself and you are staring at a shriveled face and a pattern of cracks on a leathery shell. You are seeing him put out a shy and wrinkled foot.

I step back and hastily say, “You were having fits, you were thrashing about and hurting yourself, I put the key in your palm and luckily that stopped it.”

He’s famished for air, and there’s nothing in the room but the labor and whistle of his breath and the shadow rising and falling on the wall.

I open the door and step outside, to get him the towel drying on the line. But the fresh air and the clear night make me dawdle. The ship owner who built us this room to stay in, while we are building his boat, was too cheap for a veranda. So it’s three steps and the cool sand under your feet. Three steps and the speckled sky, and the low moon tangled up in the casuarina tree. It makes me think of the life I could have—the good house, the sweet wife and the scooter that only three years of working in the Gulf could get. A carpenter in Kuwait is three times richer than a doctor here. They spit in your face, Preman says. The Arabs walk right up and *haar thoo!*—spit is running down your pretty face. Then what will you do? Pull out your *dinars* and wipe it off? Is what I have now any better? I ask. The *maisthri* says bark, he says run, he says go stand on your head in that corner. What am I but a pair of hands married to him? Two slippers that come and go as he wants? Eight years of a slave’s life, a bare month under the voting age, and not a *paisa* to my name.

It makes me sour just to think of it. Ruins the pleasure of the night. I go and pull down the towel, the line twanging and jumping behind me.

He is sitting up now. His face dark as a burnt out match. I drop the towel on his shoulders and say in a sweet voice, “Your *lungi* is wet, *maisthri*.”

It puts a scowl on his face and four good words in his mouth.

“Seed of the devil,” he spits at me.

"First thing in the morning," I say with my back to him, as I pump the stove in the corner, "first thing in the morning, and see the words you pick. It's no surprise that rich man's boat is lying on the beach like a rotting whale. For everybody to wonder about."

In the five minutes it takes the water to boil, he empties three buckets over himself at the tap, and wraps the fresh *dhotti* around his waist, hardly bothering to towel. Then he comes in tracking sand and smelling like a wet dog.

"Get the tool bags," he says, standing over me. I'm squatting on the floor, measuring into my glass the two full spoons I need this morning.

"It's almost ready," I tell him.

No need to look at his face. I can picture it—screwed up like a bat's, his mouth puckered around some sour remark.

Before he can say it, I add, "If I have to get up and plane wood in the middle of the night, if I have to indulge in that ripe madness, I want some coffee, at least, sloshing around in my stomach."

He doesn't say a word, but his hate burns the back of my neck. I can feel it, I tell you—the spite he has tended day and night singeing the nape of my neck.

The tool bags in the corner are heavy and I hear him grunt over them. By the time I have poured the hot water into my glass and turned around, he is halfway across the yard. Head tucked into his burden, legs coming down stiff on the loose sand, the two bags swinging and knocking into his knees.

"Go, go," I say after him. "Let's see how far." Hate is a good switch, but the weight of mallets and planes is another thing. What does he know of that anymore? Who's carried those two bags, sun-up and sun-down, all these years? Since I was ten, I tell you. Staggering after him while he strolled on to whatever foolishness he had planned for the day. My shoulders are hard knots of muscle. A grown squirrel jumps in my upper arm every time I curl my wrist and flex.

When I turn the corner of the Cochin Club and enter the long road of the big bungalows, I see the *maisthri* standing under a street lamp. He's catching his breath, massaging the dried gooseberries that pass for biceps on his arms. Three bags at his feet now. The white dog that some Anglo-Indian missy left behind when she died being the third. He thinks the *maisthri* is going to throw him something, so he's got his head cocked and his tongue hanging out, and every now and then he yelps and does a half-jump to coax the old man along. A guard steps through the side-gate of a bungalow to check. When he sees us, he takes out his whistle and sends the pea in it spinning. A long and a short. To wake up the other sorry fools dozing in

their upright coffins at the entrance to some rich man's Christmas cake of a house. Just in case we are crooks. I hack thoughtfully as I pass the watchman, and without even an aiming glance, hit a spot six inches from his left boot. In lieu of thrusting my hand into my *lungi* and hefting my nuts and bolts at him, and saying: You see this here, now this is the jewelry you don't have, which is why they've got you chained to some ship owner's gate to guard his young daughter's cunt.

The *maisthri* picks up his burden and blunders on like a trawler through a fog. The bags swinging wildly, scattering more than half his strength. The other half he loses on account of the dog who is prancing around and nipping at his ankles, as if a kick in the ribs were the one thing he was dying for. The *maisthri* does nothing, just keeps his nose to his armpit and stumbles on.

A hundred feet is all he can do at a time. Then he has to put down the bags and rejuvenate, while the dog plops down and does his own foolishness, and I wait behind the palmyra tree.

When the *maisthri* gets to the Dutch cemetery he doesn't go around. He passes straight under the arch and puts his feet on the path showing like a scar through the tangle that three hundred years have caused. The dog won't put a paw in it. He stands this side of the arch and whines after the *maisthri*, but he's got his legs planted wide and braced against whatever might want to pull him in. It makes me think of what they say about animals seeing what we may not even guess is crouching under some tree, or hanging from it, or sitting right here beside you.

A flock of black clouds races across the cemetery, tearing and shredding as they pass overhead. I don't know if it's that, or the breeze that's pushing them, or something else, but the goosebumps sweep up on my arms. Preman says the *parangies*⁵ are notorious for climbing out of their graves. They did not want to be buried here. It seems the lettering on their tombs is not Bible verse or family grief, but instructions on how to crack the masonry and pull out the iron caskets and where to bury them in Europe. Preman says the *parangies* get out and sit on the back wall, and look across the cement yards of the canning factories for the ships from Holland. Whole families of them, waiting anxiously for the transport that's already three centuries late. Just last month a drunk saw them, Preman says. Forty or fifty *parangies* in frocks and coats, with cat eyes and red hair and skins as pink as boiled shrimp. They turned and looked at the drunk, and he lost

5. *Parangi*: A corruption of *ferengi* (foreigner), which in Kerala signifies the Dutch and Portuguese settlers and their descendants.

control of both his taps, front and back, and never regained that sovereignty and died from it within the week. Just pissed and defecated his life away, Preman claims.

The moon's shining down, but there's no sign of the *maisthri*, not even the faint *thlip-thlap* of sandals. Vines and weeds have wrestled with the tombs and won. They've toppled the headstones and strangled the crosses. Only one tomb is standing—a lone tooth in a dead mouth. On top of it, two vases frothing over with wild flowers and between them—between them—something that puts a knocking in my chest. A marble child is crouching there, looking at me with his white eyes. The veins are showing on the hand he has clamped to the edge of the tomb. He is about to spring down from his perch. It puts such a yearning in me for the palmyra beyond the bend in the road, that I turn around and give in to the good sense that my head is preaching to my legs. The road racing under me, and not one thought in my mind but that tree where safety is.

Later, I curse the *maisthri*. I sit on the bench outside Kutty's shop, cupping a hot glass of tea and I let my bitterness come out. Eight years of following him like a dog's tail, wagging at the people he barks at, so that the rich men he hates and the householders he insults would not stop putting food in our mouths. Eight years of the *maisthri* bearing down on me, his failures and his miseries uncoiling in the midst of my life, his madness getting into my veins and laying eggs there. Eight years and look at the downfall I've come to. Running like a headless chicken from the statue of a dwarf.

He's suffering, Preman always claims. He's suffering three eternities of hell and all you can think of is putting your hand in your *lungi* and waxing your flagpole. What are you but a bent banana? A crooked stick and a wrinkled sack. And he? He's the glory that's blazed for fifty years, the real headline in the recent history of our arts and crafts, eleven perfect boats bobbing in his wake.

I should have eaten beans, I tell him, so I could have given you a good reply.

This glory that blazed for fifty years—what is the first I knew of it? Two weeks after my uncle said, here, here, don't be crying now, you can come and visit during the festival time, it's for your own good we're doing this, he'll make you the prince and prime minister of carpenters. A mere two weeks after this, I see him rutting in the temple yard. We were carving new sandalwood pedestals for the deities, and sleeping in a room the main priest was good enough to give. And what does he do but go up and down like a chameleon not ten feet from the goddess standing on her gold lotus?

A nice thing for a ten-year-old. To be woken up, night after night, because the guru he's supposed to follow until death and understand all the secrets from is wheezing and whistling over a two-rupee whore, not even caring to be quiet.

One night, the priests came in a gang to verify the rumor they had heard. They would have killed him. She knew how to run for her life, but him they chased into a corner, iron rods and steel chains in their hands.

Who saved him? What frantic ten-year-old fought and squeezed his way into the middle of that angry knot? He was propped up against the wall, his feet a few inches off the ground, a brahmin's hand at his throat. I hurled myself at them, begging and pleading, the why of it beyond me to this day. I put myself in the way so they couldn't get at him properly. So that we stayed in a clump and swayed and lurched, till their fury was exhausted and his life was saved.

The thanks I got for it? Come, he says, I'll take every skill I know and count them into your palm like so many pearls. But who would give us the work? What temple would let their deity sit in the sandalwood chamber he built? The swing he carved? *Purna ashani*, the Brahmins said, putting their fingers to their noses. *Purna ashani nin khai*, impure thy hand.

Do penance, I begged. Make a tour of all the shrines, just for show, to convince them. The answer that roared out of him with an arrogance he could ill afford? To hell with them, he said. Let's go to Kuttanad. There are boat lovers there, *Nair* and *Pillai* landlords with a hundred acres of wet land and a real interest in the arts.

Love the landlords had, but only cobwebs in their money chests, and too much vanity to tell us straight. Hemming and hawing and pretending to calculate, and setting dates even and raising a foolish excitement in him, on the periphery of which I stood, trying to point out the sagging roof and the three unmarried daughters past their prime, peeping out the window at any passing male. Fifty of these *Nairs*, I told him, fifty put together could not come up with the five *lakhs* it takes these days to build a decent snake-boat. Easier to convince a corpse. So we stayed there fixing old furniture and propping up reeling mangers, building benches and tables for the local teashops. For eight years my life thrown away with his, not learning one skill but the everyday nail and hammer thing, no knowledge in me to even build the doors and windows of a peon's house. I asked other carpenters to take me on, but with so many others begging to learn a trade, who wants the ill-luck of someone who worked under him? Be patient, my uncle says every time I write to him. A few good jobs and you'll have the money for a work visa and an Air India ticket to the Gulf. Come home now and you'll

end up on the veranda with your chin in your hands like all the other unemployed in this state.

Then we heard of the shrimp exporter here in Cochin. Scratch him and he bleeds rubies, they said. When he farts, rupee notes float to the ground. The man had a desire for a boat, they said. The best *chundan*⁶ ever made, with a fine up-curving stern and a big brass eye in the middle of it. I dragged the *maisthri* here, and the minute I saw that three-tiered house, with the two watchmen and garden big as a park, I begged him to let me talk.

Who brought it about? Our good fortune? Who stood before the shrimp exporter every morning, three weeks in a row, while he sipped his tea and mulled over newspapers from five countries? Who blew and blew on the coals and brought his desire to a blaze? Singing the *maisthri*'s praise, naming the big temples that owned his boats, claiming that everything he made was an arrow zipping towards perfection. Till one day, the shrimp exporter looked up from his newspaper and studied me through his glasses, as if seeing me for the first time, and asked, Where do you get the best wood?

Quite a show we had on that first day. Five lorry loads of logs stacked up on the beach, a fire pit already dug, a thatched roof over the work area, and twenty carpenters lined up and eyeing each other's tools jealously. A reporter took pictures and stored away what the *maisthri* said in his tape recorder. The shrimp exporter opened the velvet case he had brought with him, and took out a gold-plated chisel and made the inaugural chip at the wood. Now at least one art from our abandoned past will be rediscovered on this beach, Preman, the youngest of the carpenters, said.

How he fooled us all—the *maisthri*. The commands pouring out of him at first, the fingers racing over the chalkboard and etching designs so fast that twenty carpenters could not keep up. In less than a month, there was the shape of a boat, tall enough to require a scaffolding. Then what happens? Wait, wait, he says. I have to think. Stop the work, I have to draw. He paces around the boat for three days, twenty paid carpenters sitting in the shade and watching him. On the fourth day, he stops and looks at the workers gazing at him, and he suddenly shouts, Dogs! You dogs! and he picks up a stick and charges them.

How do you think the shrimp exporter got rich? You can all go home,

6. *Chundan*: Traditional Keralan "snake-boat" (because of its long, narrow shape) that was used for pirate raids and in skirmishes. The building of these boats is a rare occurrence today. Still, there is much glamour attached to them.

he tells the carpenters. When the *maisthri* is ready we'll send for you. We have a union, they tell him, you can't play with us. Open your eyes, he says, and you'll see the *maisthri* running up and down the beach like some railway station lunatic. It's not my fault.

What to do but wait beside the rose bushes for the shrimp exporter to look up from his newspaper? Only this time Preman is there with me. He talks and talks, Preman does, about how our past is a sad shipwreck on the ocean floor and the *maisthri* one of the last who could dive down and bring up the treasures from that hulk. What does the shrimp exporter care for such flowery talk? I can't pay good wages for idleness, he says. The *maisthri's* brain is overheated, I step up and say. That's all that is happening here. A few days' rest and he'll wake up and pounce on the work that's left. He'll take it between his teeth and tear it to shreds. That's how he always is.

It's a lie that makes the shrimp exporter snap his newspaper and look up, a feigned disinterest on his face. Wages he still won't pay. But the roof over our heads and the three meals from Kutty's stall he'll continue to provide.

A clerk came in the evenings to check. A shabby clerk in wrinkled clothes and with a smell of gunny sacks and warehouse dust. Asking this daily question: Shall I tell the carpenters to assemble tomorrow? One more day, I would say, and the *maisthri* will want them lined up and ready to go at six o'clock. Then, the shrimp exporter got caught in the current of some business emergency and forgot all about us. Two months since we've seen his clerk.

Only Preman comes, his face longer and thinner by the day. Three brothers in the Gulf, begging him to get a passport and go share in their good fortune, and what does he do but stick around here, washing buses at the transport stand. At noon, he brings us the lunch from Kutty's stall the shrimp exporter has forgotten to cancel.

Has the *maisthri* stirred yet? Preman asks every day.

Are the crows flying upside down? I respond.

The spit and froth he is willing to spew in defense of the old man! The rage I stir in him just by telling the truth.

Here, I tell Preman, let me give you proof. And I put down, one by one, like shiny silver sardines, ample evidence of the *maisthri's* growing insanity.

You want to see him finished, don't you? he accuses me. You want to see him carried shoulder-high into the cremation grounds.

My fault that the mushrooms are multiplying in the *maisthri*'s head?
Look at what he's doing this morning.

By the time I get to the beach, the sun is a small sliver burning on the horizon. The light is melting and spreading on the sea. Some fat trawlers are chugging past the white sandbar, and this side of it, a swordfish is diving in and out like a sewing needle. The waves are folding crisply and shooting up the slope of the beach. And the *maisthri* you ask? How is he adding to this scenery? He's standing in the ocean, in water up to his neck. His arms are stretched skyward in a trembling vee, and his bald head is bobbing down in the crook of it like a dried coconut. Out of his mouth, the Sanskrit *slokas* are coming out in a high dog-whine. Verse after verse of some moth-eaten prayer even God has forgotten by now. To praise the sun coming up.

"Hey *maisthri*," I shout. "Is that the sun coming up, or someone hanging upside down in the sea and defecating?"

Every day that orb comes up and flays us alive on this beach. And what does he do? Raises his arms and wails to it. Welcomes the very thing that drives a long hot nail through our heads. All the shade we had flew away, frond by frond. The bamboo poles that used to hold up the canopy have split past their top knuckles and are gaping parched white throats at the sky. Each day the sun slits them further down. The pitfire is a gray eye socket, and beyond it, the boat is lying in the skeletal palm of its scaffolding. The sand is cool now, but wait a few hours. It'll scald your eyeballs to look.

The only thing the chanting does? Puts a false confidence in him. He hurries out of the sea, his *dhoti* flapping wetly around his ankles, and goes straight to the chalkboard leaning against the boat. I squat near the pitfire and watch him out of the corner of my eye. He wipes the slate clean with the edge of his wet garment, then picks up the blue chalk and cocks his head. Pretty soon he starts firing away like a telegraph machine someone is controlling from the other side. The muscles in his back rippling frantically. The chalk jumping in his hand and the board starting to fill up with the banana shapes of the boat he is trying too hard to build.

Before long what happens? The diagrams begin to displease him. He swipes at the board with his wet *dhoti* and tries again, his hand slower now and the chalk starting to screech and drag like a child who does not want to go to school. He stops and stares at whatever madness he has scrawled, and his head begins to tremble and his confidence to run out like sand.

Why make it long? He paces around the boat, muttering and marking the wood here and there with his chalk. Then he tucks up his *dhoti* and puts

a foot on the scaffolding and heaves up into the boat. He picks his way down the length of it, from rib to rib, and in a few minutes it is all finished. He has climbed onto his favorite spot—the base from which the stern should rise—and he is squatting there, knees pointed at the prow, the grape bunch between his legs sagging in his *dhoti*, his head drooping in the cup of his palm, the look on his face already that of a lizard stunned by the heat.

What is there to do but go and sit where the lip of the boat gives some shade? This same tableau everyday—me dozing under the prow and him cooking his brains above. And the sand getting hot and releasing its ghosts one by one, and the sea coming and going listlessly, and a seagull tipping over it now and then, or a catamaran sliding by.

It almost makes me happy to see Preman arrive. He stands on the edge of the beach, two scrawny legs and half a shimmering white shirt, the rest of him gobbled up by the black bubble of his umbrella. The cloth bag with our lunch and water bottles in it hangs from his arm. What he sees from there takes the air out of him. His feet drag and raise dust as he comes towards us.

“Preman!” I call out when he gets close.

His legs stop and think, then they come toward me reluctantly. These days, I hold out my hand and he spits in it. Still I try. Who else to talk to?

“He was screaming in his sleep again,” I say in a low voice. “When I jumped up, there he was—blowing bubbles at the rafters and drowning in his own spit.”

“So you stepped forward, hero that you are, and saved his life,” he mocks.

Born fool! I want to shout into that thin wedge of face glaring down at me. The earth revolving and people progressing everywhere but on this corner of the beach, and you without the half-ounce of sense to understand that. Always blaming me, and finding excuses for the *maisthri* sitting up there on that boat like a constipated toad.

What’s the use in talking? No friendliness between us anymore. I stand up and brush the sand from my legs, and without bothering to confront the glassy distaste showing in Preman’s eyes, I hold out my hand for the leaf-wrapped lunch.

My good fortune that they eat together, the two of them drinking the water from the same bottle and belching in each other’s face. Usually Preman talks. Cracking jokes and telling news and spitting on the world as if everyone but him and a few rare ones were donkey’s shit. Making the *maisthri* break into cackles, his hand stopped half-way to his mouth, the butter-milk from the balled-up rice running in a white vein down his arm.

Today, I hear Preman try and try, but everything he says is a matchstick scratching at a wet surface. Then there is such a silence wrapped around them that I interrupt my eating to stand up and look.

Preman is sitting just below the prow, straddling the plank across the top of the boat and squinting off into the sea. His face is nested in his hands and his spine is a curve of despondency. His lunch packet he hasn't even taken out of the bag. And the *maisthri*? What's he doing you ask? Trying to cram the whole world into his mouth. He scoops up the rice with his hand and squeezes it into a ball that makes his cheeks bulge out. Then he starts chewing with ambulance haste, head thrust forward, jaws working like bellows, pupils shrilling out at everyone. The buttermilk courses down the corners of his mouth. I turn away to save what's left of my appetite.

All day long his hunger sleeps, then it comes awake and behaves worse than a starving dog.

Before he leaves, Preman comes under the prow.

"He's doing poorly," he says, dolefully.

"Since the day he was born," I respond.

That brings the unfriendly gleam back into his eyes. "You can't put by your malice for even a minute, can you?" he asks.

"Twenty carpenters and their families without proper food, not to mention me being dragged awake each night at four o'clock, and you are calling *me* names?" I ask.

His face goes tight and the rims of his ears get red. There are words pushing against the line of his lips, but he holds them back.

"Why hide the truth? The *maisthri*'s going mad," I say.

"There are worse things than that," he spits out.

The contempt on his face! You are nothing, nothing multiplied by nothing, his eyes tell me. I step back and throw up my hands. "All the wisdom in the world just reared up on its hind legs and overwhelmed me," I say.

For a moment there is enough heat in him to start a fight. Then the starch goes out of him and weariness comes into his face. He shakes his head and looks away as if arguing with me were not worth his time.

"That pot up there is cracked," I say, pointing to the *maisthri*, "and this is all the answer you have?"

"Leave him alone," he tells me.

"Eight years of my life tangled up with his. Easy for you to talk."

"Make sure he gets home safe in the evening," he replies. Then there is the clink of the water bottles hitting each other in the cloth bag hanging from his arm, and I watch his sandals flip up the sand as he walks away

from the boat. I watch the jerk-and-go of the small shadow he drags behind him. He gets smaller and smaller and soon he is no more than a white patch shimmering and swaying in the haze.

I stretch my limbs. My legs are cramped from trying to stay within the shadow of the prow. The *maisthri* is motionless under the umbrella Preman had put over him. The steel stem flashes down his shoulder and the curved handle juts in front of him like a hook. I decide to walk down to the sea.

The beach is endless up and down the rim of the coast. It is a ribbon of gold on which the sun is hammering. The ocean is a surface of tipping mirrors that spike my eyes. I step carefully, but the sand overflows and burns my feet.

The waves have no height and the surf that whispers up the slope leaves scant garlands of froth. I scoop some water and lave the back of my neck. The sea is cool. I take off my shirt and *lungi* and wade past the tired heave of the ocean till I'm neck deep in it.

It's like taking a measure of cough syrup, only the coolness is not just in your throat. The water buoys me, rocks me on my heels. The undertow comes and sucks at my toes.

Just when I'm thinking this is not bad, there is a reminder from the sun. It's a white hole at the top of the sky, bright enough to punch out your pupils if you looked. It comes and lays a newly-minted coin on my head. I duck down into the coolness, but when I come up, the sun is there, waiting patiently, and soon I feel the half-rupee diameter of that coin again, burning into my skull.

God! I think. The injustice of it. People out there who murder and steal, husbands who abandon families and wives who betray, and every other kind of evil going on in the world and me without any part in it, but suffering still. Not one wrong in me worth telling, just the everyday petty things, no killing or rape or groping between the legs of my own daughter, nothing but patience and hard work and giving respect everywhere it's due, yet look at the fate I've come to.

It makes the bitterness burn in my throat. Makes the anger come and grab hold of me and myself a mere puppet in its grasp and doing things that are a discredit to my sanity. Raising my arms and thrashing the water all around to a froth. Just hitting and hitting, I tell you. Bringing my fists down and making the spray leap up and hiss on the water like a whip. Not a thing holding me back. Only my fists descending and the shouts coming out of my mouth pure sound. So loud they make my own ears ring. For a long time, I tell you, this pitch of madness. The anger put by till now com-

ing out and telling the world frankly.

In the same quick way it began, the frenzy runs out. Suddenly, it's only my lungs that are heaving. The hoarseness of my breath is the only noise I hear. My legs are weak and the hair is sticking to my forehead. There's a taste of blood at the back of my throat, and despite the sea washing me, I can smell the hot stink rising off my skin.

Such exhaustion, I tell you. Just slumping down like sludge, not even the strength to hold up my head. But it's nothing to fight—this good tiredness. I take the weight off my legs and let my head go under.

It's quiet there, in the clear mouth of the sea. The undertow just strong enough to hold me down. The sand white, with its own rows of waves. Some pomfrets hover in the distance, pushing their lips in and out, as they meditate together. Nearby, a slow crab burrows and the sand puckers and closes tight over him. There is a nice soreness in my muscles and the water massages my face. Comes and presses against the tired arches of my feet. Lifts me up and down to its breathing. I let my own breath inflate my cheeks, then I slowly exhale, shaping the air into rounded silver plums.

It empties my head—that breath going out. Expels all the noise and confusion. Just clear space between me and the horizon. My arms float above me, my spine is nicely curved, my body is couched in the sea. I'm swaying in the hammock of the ocean.

Then this happens. A sane voice comes and suddenly blooms in the midst of all that calm. A sane voice telling me this:

Of all the dangers in the world, what is the worst?

The drowning man. The one going down. When the water grabs his ankles, what does he do but look for someone to take with him? From the shore you see someone struggling. You jump in without thinking, you reach out a hand. Suddenly, he's got his arms and legs wrapped around you, the bone of his forearm is crushing your throat. Wait! you shout. I'll save your life. He's too undone to hear. Let me go, you plead. He's a dead weight hunched upon your back, his terror is a chokehold you cannot break. Your face is tipped up at the sky, and you see vast cloudlessness, not a thing to hold on to. His legs get between yours and strangle the fight to stay afloat. You go down to a green and crushing depth. Still, you try. Dancing a lopsided dance. He tightens around you like a knot. The breath starts to gurgle out of you and the noise echoes in your head. Maybe there will be light enough to see the last of your life go up in a string of silver bubbles.

What do I do when the sun goes down? I follow the good sense my head dictates. The sane advice that will benefit him and me and everybody else in the world. There is a can of kerosene and a box of matches that we

start the pitfire with. It's buried in the sand. I go and dig it up. Then I climb into the boat.

The umbrella has blown away, but he is squatting in the same spot, hunched, a fleshy snail-knot on the wood. His splayed feet, his outthrust knees and the bald head wavering above it the same triumvirate of features distinguishing the stone demon peering from the cornice of the *Bhagavathi* shrine. He stares as I pick my way to the stern, but his eyes are looking at some other world. I slosh the can under his nose, "Here, *maisthri*," I say, "the kerosene you wanted and also the matches. There are wood shavings in the pit. But the boat is so dry you may not need them."

Nothing stirs. So I repeat what I said. Then I stand there dropping some other words in his ears and watching for the ripples in his eyes. It's five minutes before something moves its tadpole tail in the murky pond depth I'm staring into. A scant light starts to flit over his face. It gives me hope. I blow and blow on the weak remains of whatever sense he once must have had. I recount the history of the past eight years, not putting one bit of varnish on it. Doesn't the plain truth suppressed deserve a voice? Do you always need a horoscope to tell what will come?

All the time I'm speaking his head sinks between his knees. The truth is a weight he hasn't borne for a while and he's forgotten how to by now. Not a word comes out of him, but by and by his fingers begin to flutter over his bald pate like a batch of dying moths.

I leave the can and the box of matches next to him and get down from the boat.

The sand is cool now. The sky bears witness to the sun going down. Such raw pinks and reds, I tell you. My back is turned and I'm walking away quickly from it, but I can picture how that light must be lapping the boat. Tonguing the length and breadth of it, cradling the full hundred-foot failure of it. I can see the *maisthri* in the middle of everything.

Om Shanti, I think, walking home. *Agni purna shudam* as the brahmins say. Fire purifies, and saves the world from drowning.