

Excerpts from *Yalpanam*

Shivani Sivagurunathan

The following excerpts are from Shivani Sivagurunathan's novel, Yalpanam, which will be published by Penguin SEA in 2021.

The novel centres on one hundred- and eighty-five-year-old recluse, Pushpanayagi, who is on the brink of a transformation, and finds herself travelling back in time to 19th century and 1940s Malaya where she visits people from her past, including Charles Tanner, a British lepidopterist, and his servant Abu. Both characters feature in the excerpts below.

The gibbons in the jungle awakened. The one-eyed dog beneath the jacaranda tree opened its eye and peered at dew-kissed swifts flying low. By the well behind the house, the frogs awakened and the sole toad lifted its heavy eyelids, their tongues darting for insects slowly emerging in the rose pink morning, the sun a new sun. A baked disc, fresh arrival, still kind to naked eyes, indiscriminate Mother of the earth: blackbirds sang loudly, mad about the new glittering rays streaming onto grass, pebbles, flowers, water, worms, the old lady's finger perched on the veranda railing, blindly pointing in the direction of the cabbages. Her eyes—did they register the morning morphing from pink to orange? She gazed, far out in the distance, past the land opposite her house, perhaps at the clear wide sky, perhaps at the sepulchral bushes surrounding the land.

Once before, years and years ago, she stood in the very same spot on the veranda and gazed out into the garden, her hands dripping not with water from gardening but with juice from a coconut she'd drunk straight from the un-husked shell after which, delighted, refreshed, she proclaimed to the magpies that had come to steal the little butterfly-collecting tools left out on a table, 'How good is life! How good is life!' It would be unfair to dismiss this declaration as a feverish exaggeration brought on by the coconut juice consumed with gusto on a dazzling silvery morning. There were, indeed, very good things happening in and around the house, and certainly, in the lives of those who lived in it. The old woman—then, not yet astonishingly old, but not entirely young either, a mature middle-age—had new guests in her home, guests who soon turned into comfortable residents who embarked on an unlikely life with her. Unlikely because

colonial society on the island was not privy to what it considered to be bizarre assemblies or camaraderie of any kind, be it servant-master intimacy, Malay-Chinese riverside banter while poaching fish, or mongrel families that sometimes formed, quite spontaneously, across the island, all defying classification. Ironically, the head guest Pushpanayagi invited into her home had a passion that matched and sometimes even surpassed the colonial love of order. He was a butterfly man, a lepidopterist with a sharp blue eye for minutiae, and he spent most of his spare time catching butterflies, breeding them in a room in the house, studying them under large imported-from-England magnifying glasses, giving his beloved winged creatures long, elaborate Latin names, dipping them in formaldehyde and pressing them neatly between sheets of rice paper. The day over, he would materialise from his butterfly room, accomplished, in the highest of spirits, ready for the feast his servant-cook, Abu, had laid out on the long mahogany table in the dining area beside the front hall. And Pushpanayagi, already a lady of inheritance and therefore of leisure, would sit across from her guest at the dinner table, and delicately cut her food with a fork and knife while glancing at her guest from time to time, asking him agreeable questions about butterflies and about the plantation he managed. The guest's wife, by this point a self-professed invalid, too 'unimaginably melancholic' to eat, would be upstairs in her room, counting jasmine petals from a bunch the servant-cook brought her once every two days, out of, as he told Pushpanayagi, 'something burn in my heart.'

Perhaps those who had been allowed to visit the wife (there were none) would have concluded: this is *not* a good life and it certainly does not warrant gulping down fresh coconut water and exclaiming to a deaf world that life is good. But those phantom onlookers would have been people attracted to veneers, to swift, easy conclusions. Mary Tanner, transported by her desperate husband to the house of the mystical Sybil (as Pushpanayagi was called in those days), was, in the minds of Charles Tanner and Sybil herself, lucky.

It had happened like this: failing to find a cure for Mary's mysterious ailment, Charles, in an uncharacteristic fit of something, sought the help of the woman who had inherited his second cousin's house, not for that reason, but for the glaring fact that people, colonials and natives both, talked about her supernatural connection to the land, of her past as the Mystic under the Banyan Tree, of her ability to commune with devils and unseen entities that swarmed the island and stealthily entered homes and possessed the

living. For, he one day concluded, Mary, cherub-faced, merry cherry-eater and meadow-skipper in England, transformed backwards, from butterfly to caterpillar, not immediately upon stepping foot on the island, but gradually, over three or four years, so that, he further concluded, he had no other choice but to believe his cook-servant, Abu, when he whispered to his master, 'Is Syaitan, Tuan. Mem got Devil inside.'

At least, house-owner and head guest agreed the few times they broached the subject at dinner, at least, upstairs, she was safe from spirits. Sorrow, they said, was a normal human feeling. It had nothing to do with devils. And so it went on, these peaceful dinners, and this unlikely co-existence colonial society believed was 'incredible', 'remarkably strange', 'improper—Husband, Wife, Servant, and...?' Even then, Pushpanayagi, whether consciously or not, defied the kind of categorisation favoured by her head guest. Interestingly, he did not seem to mind—in fact, he enjoyed the murkiness about her which he decided was the mark of all good mystics. The plump, audacious Blavatsky was awakening something in the English world with her occult ideas and esoteric eyes. Mediums, ladies with swirling eyes, were channelling spirits and souls, piquing the interest of men and women of genius, poets, artists, intellectuals, not ordinary folk, not the mediocre, but those with *vision*. Darwin (Charles Tanner was secretly flattered that he shared the great scientist's name) had burst biblical bubbles, and those new rock-men, studying the earth, silts and sedimentations, boldly revealed that the Earth was not six-thousand years old, as the Bible said, but older, much older. There was Charles Tanner, in the midst of this dichotomy between hard facts and spiritual unravelling, between a new physicality—a new earth was, after all, being discovered—and a new ethereality, a man proud of the Victorian age that, luckily for him, was still alive and flourishing, a man of Empire, a man of science, make no mistake, but subject nevertheless to rupturing notions of reality, thousands of miles away from his original centre of gravity, on an island not generally known by ordinary British men and women. Life was good! An Indian Blavatsky (in his head alone; no one else made the connection) by his side, articles on tropical butterfly and moth life in Entomology Journals, Charles Tanner saw himself as a New Man, modern, very much in the eye of the zeitgeist storm.

And the Blavatsky of his making (the names Blavatsky and Sybil were soon dropped by Charles and replaced with the more modest ‘Deborah’), ignorant of her Russian precedent, assumed her role as she had assumed her previous role as Banyan Woman: charmingly, and without question. She gave counsel with silence and eye-gazing, successful techniques for Charles who was less interested in being helped than in believing he had, after fifteen years on the island, adapted to its eccentricities.

Thus, it proceeded, until the end, Charles’s bones given to the land he could not, for whatever reason, bring himself to leave. Stirring, yes, some of those bones behind the house are his, stirring without the old woman’s knowledge.

But—those are ancient stories, too ancient some may say, for a rich tangerine morning when every creature that should have awakened, had awakened, and the air smelled of fresh, new life. The old woman, finished with her gazing, turned around and coughing between sighs, moseyed back into the house, yearning for sleep, too tired, unlike the rest of the awakened world, to remain with eyes open.

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The jungle is cool, dark, noisy with insects hiding in leaves and branches, inside cracks in the soil from which plants sprout, tall, short, wide, decaying, ferns, spikes, thorns, spores, vines, twisting, erect, curling, so close they kiss, so close the taller plants provide shelter for the shorter ones.

‘Tuan.’

‘Sssshhhh!’

Abu lowers the rifle in his hands, shakes his head at the dimly lit lamp at his feet and taps the armrest of the chair. Pushpanayagi watches him from the corner of her eye, then turns towards him and lifts her eyebrows. He shakes his head again, rolls his eyes, and points at Charles in the chair.

‘Tuan.’

Charles jerks back and sighs. ‘What the devil do you want?’

Abu rushes forward, parks himself by the edge of the chair. He hugs the rifle to his chest. ‘Tiger not come, Tuan. Now much dark, Tuan. Mem need for food.’

Charles glares at the rifle in Abu's arms. His gaze slowly travels up to his servant's neck, chin, nose, finally the eyes. 'We're doing this for *her*, can't you see?' He rests his own rifle on the armrests of his chair; it lies over his lap like a bar keeping him in his seat. 'Kitty is perfectly capable of babysitting for one measly evening. I would think so! For God's sakes, man, we're saving the bloody island!'

Abu hangs his head and steps back. 'Yes, Tuan.'

Charles lifts the rifle and points ahead. 'When the beast comes, we simply aim and shoot. Now please be quiet. To conquer the beast, one has to trick the beast. It mustn't know we're here.'

Pushpanayagi tiptoes to the chair next to Charles and sits down. It squeaks. She clenches its armrests and whispers, 'Sorry, sorry.'

'Not to worry, Deborah. Somehow I don't think the tiger would mind you. In fact...if you could do whatever it was you did when that blasted baboon stole mangoes from the tree, that would be splendid.' He lowers the rifle. 'What did you do, exactly?'

Pushpa flips her single plait over her shoulders and looks to the ground. The earth is damp, littered with leaves and pebbles, twigs, a few crawling insects. She breathes in deeply. The air is stagnant, filled with the smells of soil and wet bark; woody, a little blood-like. 'I told it to go. That's all.'

'Just like that. Well, do ask the tiger to come. We can't have it killing all our women. What a beast! To know exactly what it wants. Quite a will.' He raises the rifle and aims at the darkness.

'You don't have to kill, Charles. If it's eating people, it's already old—'

'Nonsense! What sort of a human being allows a beast to take what isn't its right to take? And with no fight? Never will I live such a life! It is the life of a worm.'

Abu taps the armrest of Charles's chair. 'Tuan, Tuan,' he whispers, 'tiger come.' Abu directs their gaze with his rifle. A slow squelching of leaves blends in with the insects' song. Down below, the frayed tip of a tail flashes behind a Meranti tree and disappears. Charles angles his rifle at the space between the Meranti tree and a slender palm. The animal darts out from behind the tree. Charles fires his weapon. He reloads and fires again. The tiger staggers drunkenly and drops to the ground. He reloads and fires, again,

and again, five, six, seven, eight shots. He charges up from his seat and bolts down the slope towards the beast. Abu trails close behind, rifle tightly clutched in one hand, lamp in the other. Pushpanayagi watches them, hand over mouth, and scrambles after them.

Charles looms over the dead animal, Pushpanayagi inching closer. A single long fang peeks out of the animal's slightly parted mouth, its eyes frozen in death. Blood blooms from a wound on its chest. Charles reloads the rifle, aims at the tiger's neck and shoots. The shot echoes thunderously through the jungle. He reloads again, points the weapon at the animal's stomach, and fires again. Abu chucks his rifle on the ground and creeps in the direction of the tiger. Charles lifts the rifle high and in one quick sweep, swings the weapon down and thrusts it into the tiger's chest. He pierces the animal's flesh with the stock of the rifle, pounds and hammers and pulps the beast over and over and over again.

'Stop, Tuan! Stop! Tiger die already.'

Charles stabs the tiger's head, stabs it so hard its skull cracks. He releases the rifle and falls to his knees. Abu scurries forward. 'Tuan. Tuan. What happen, Tuan?' Charles buries his face in his palms.

Clumps of flesh litter the ground. Streaks of muscle and tissue lie between and over bones. Only the paws and the tail remain whole. Pushpanayagi turns away from the carcass, from Charles and Abu. She covers her mouth with her hands and begins to convulse. She leans against the closest tree, vomits, and massages her belly, and vomits again.

The insects stop singing. A grave quiet fills the jungle.

Charles rises, his face catatonic, frozen like the eyes of the tiger he has just killed. 'Well, I...' he mutters. He glances at Abu, then at Pushpanayagi. A look of horror falls over his face. It slowly turns into a vacant glare, then the hollowness departs and gradually, something soft infuses his eyes, cheeks, lips. Pushpanayagi recognises the softness. She has seen it many times on many faces, and on her own, when in rare moments, she looks into a mirror and sees the fear bubble beneath a sheen of shame.