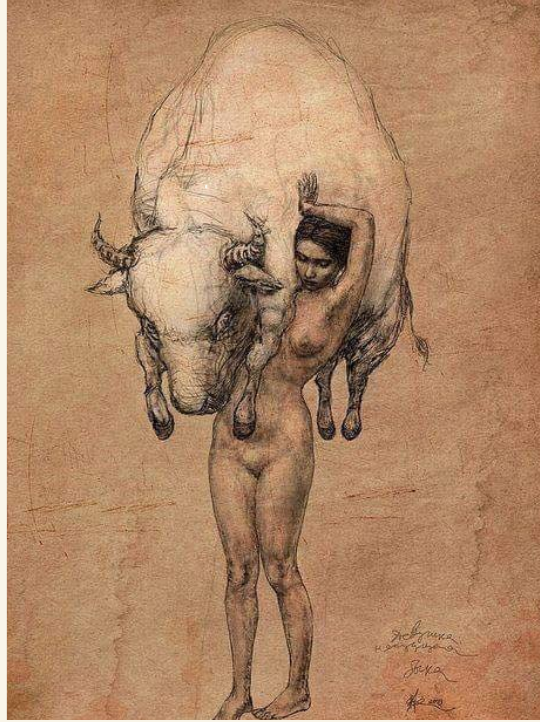


P.J. RYAN



THE COW SAID

Part 1

She was a young woman who farmed alone on the flat plains of the now silent bullet stained fields of the Northern province of Sri Lanka. It had been seven years now since she had fired a gun. But for 7 years prior she became a warrior. At the age of 14 she was conscripted, trained and sent to war. After seven years of fighting alongside her parents, they were transferred to a different division and for three months before the war ended her parents were made ready and trained with what their captain called Tuñiccalāñai, their leader described was the highest form of duty and honour.

Each day she saw her parents, she saw them watch their daughter with pride and they would come down to help her as the tools and beast were put away at the end of the day.

Her parents had settled into normal life but were sad their daughter was not married. The young woman would speak softly without reaction to their concerns. And hear their pride and they said.

“Dearest, it gives us curiosity great as our admiration for your efforts. Where is the man to stand by you on this land? Find him, make him surrender to you, show him how you love him, and feed him, show him you create the best food and have passionate kisses for him”

“Oh Mummy, how could I make a man surrender to me?”

The tending and extra care has the mangos ready.”

She combed her hair with her clean fingers as she stood there and readied herself for the tools to be put away. And then like normal they forgot all about the answer, but not the question. With her hair pulled back her face was harmonious and timeless and she could have been anyone from many tribes though-out much of history.

The yoke, harness and plow with its straps and weight. The small cart along with the barrow and the digging fork, both with welding modifications that were simple and essential to the tools usefulness. The beast was a buffalo and the buffalo was a cow, she was black and in the wet season she looked shiny and could sparkle like the skies in the middle of the night with no moon. Today the buffalo too looked tired and dirty, but her patience and love for the young woman was always available, like a friend who's light was always on.

The young woman was slim and fit with long thin muscles that could be seen on her arms and face. Her hair was always pulled back and often messy with sweat and dirt holding the black strands against her face; periodically being smeared away by her hand that was strong and rough from working hard dirt with the heavy tools. The muscles didn't hurt and the callouses gave her a softness that was humble and lovely. The muscles were tired and sore from working hard everyday, when work needed to be done she focused on the progress of work so they didn't hurt.

She had killed with a gun, with explosives, with a knife, with a beautiful sunset she had people take their last breath and with her smarts she questioned why she did it, it was not like there was any option. She trusted and could be trusted and when she laid on the back of her

bovine her troubles disappeared and with the beat of each hoof she would be fearless.

She would lay on her belly with her leg comfortably stretched along the beast's back or easily hanging down either side of the girth, in this position they would walk the flat lands and talk, her best friend's ear was always available. Sometimes she would lay on her back with her hands or her small bag as a makeshift pillow supporting her head, long into the night, long after her mother had called her for dinner, she would stare and sit into the stars discussing their hopes and dreams.

They were always together the young woman and the buffalo. And on this day they left her small cottage when the day was still dark with no moon and just the stars. The young woman and the buffalo walked the district with the sound of the earth on earth in each step, each breath with the crickets, the frogs and other bovine. The young woman heard and saw the sky and felt the grasses as they walked. And soon after the small birds began their morning. And a peacock called for a mate, from on high in coconut trees, all these songs mixed with the growing distant sound of traffic heralded the first changes to dawn and she enjoyed the brief coolness. This simple time of day she enjoyed more than the respite that the afternoon brought. She knew the different phases of the day well, and she knew how walking and working at the correct pace provided longevity. Most days were spent in the fields labouring for her life, where soil and mud clotted to her skin. Moving loads, setting fields, doing the farming on every level became **second/first**/primary nature. Following the nurturing force the morning brought, the land and sky charged with an oppressing heat, the softness of the morning was soon overpowered with the unfiltered heat of the horizontal rays from the east.

"Miss Moo" the young woman said to the cow as they continued along the fenceless hard plain with the small cart towed behind.

"Will I always be a warrior, being kept awake at night? They still speak to me I can still hear it"

"I know, I see your light on at the strangest of times, I see you, I would like it if you came and said hello. You are safe now, I am here. We are all a little lost."

Thank you Kalinga, I know the look of your big eyes and how you are such a good listener. And you are such a good listener when I play with

your ears, but you did not always like it when I would play with your ears, you would flinch them, and you would try to make me stop, by using your hooves. Didn't you. And it was all to distract you, when you were crying for your mum. Well mostly to distract you, because oh I loved rubbing your soft velvet ears when you were a small calf, it was the softest thing in the world, and fortunately it distracted you when you felt lost, and cold and disconnected. Oh when I first met you you cried milky, convoluting tears. And you couldn't tell me where you were from. And we walked for days and days, and you called out for her"

"You raised me after that."

I would like it if you came and said hello. You are safe now like I am safe with you, you can play with my ears and tell me more about your troubles. I am here, my ears may not be as soft but they are good for listening.

Crocodiles are the only ones without stress."

"Oh they are very good for listening. And when I shampoo and condition them and dry them with a towel they are very good to play with, and talk to. I am gifted to have you, but I can't be sleeping in the field every night. The gravity of your big heart and stillness between beats are good for me. But the wild fields are no place for me to sleep."

"It's ok it's gone now. It's finished it's a good day today."

"Yes, I get a hot breakfast and desert. And you will get some bananas and carrots. With friends, it's the best kind of day. You and me and friends with food, what else could I need."

"How about an afternoon rest at the water hole, maybe you will start dreaming of farming. The progress of each day, and feel the anticipation that comes before good sleep."

Work! I have enough work for the day. I have no need nor desire to dream of farming, And I see your anticipation before you wallow in the dam."

"But what about your own kitchen you said we could build a house and you are a young woman and I am a young cow."

"Yes to find my love. Oh I will love them and they love me too when I find my love you will see they will make me happy. But first there is sacrifice and work to do. You are a silly cow, And I think I would prefer to chase you, than work all day for a man."

"Did you say a swim at the dam? And sitting, you can tell me more. More about your new home and kitchen, and what type of man you like, and

tell me your problems until you are happy to be here. Tell me about the jobs I can do. I want to plough the field by myself". The cow said.

"Oh there is much to do"

You are already there. You are it. I have grass. I love you no matter what, till the end."

"I think you are getting ahead of yourself, you are still younger than me".
Tamilya said.

There were sweats and sleepless nights or sometimes worse a deep sleep that felt far too real. But after each step these days, the fears were less, and not as intense, she thought how most small birds greet the dawn with loud song. A time to rise and often, with little sleep.

6 kilometres past and the soft sounds that greet the sun had gone.

Listening, walking step by step, her stare transfixed and vacant, the young woman continued with a malaise disillusionment like mindfully asleep. But she was not asleep she was mindfully aware of the sun and the land, each giving her sanctity through magic and knowledge, she trusted in the fields and the sky. The young woman knew her hard roads of the past and present observation gave great strength. The crops that grew on the ground, the fruit in the trees, the birds, the monkeys and other animals, with overlapping influence the young woman saw how the monsoon rains change the land. This baked hard land provided and protected the young woman in the harshest way. She knew the cow made everything possible, the cow brought something fresh to how the young woman felt.

"When is the festival? So we can dance down through the crossroads we can show them our dance."

"i don't think the festival of lakota needs a song and dance about bananas."

"It does." the cow said.

No one saw them approaching the junction walking in from the east, until they were within calling distance but no one called. It had become natural for her to walk with the tree line and the sunlight between them and their destination, the junction, an intersection with a small number of shops where two roads crossed.

From anyones perspective it was was a small town on flat land that contained everything the locals could want, a garage, a barber, the largest shop with a miscellany of items; eggs in wooden crates lined with straw, next to large open sacks of chillies, dahl, besan, chick pea and corn, all colourful at the front of the shop, the rest of the assemblage of

diverse items plastic trumpery, wrapped in cellophane hanging from the ceiling, or on the two rows of metal shelving. And there were two small eating houses which served dahl and roti, and an assortment of fried small goods in glass display counters for people to buy and consume elsewhere, out of sight. To the side of each restaurant there was a storeroom each with a wood door that was open and full of empty glass bottles, in wooden and plastic crates to be picked up and refilled with soft drink. But most people drank tea with their spicy breakfast it was all they could afford.

The active crows kraa and rattled from the telephone and electricity lines over head, and were not put off by the rising temperature nor the dust or the noise not even the haunting blank stares of some of the people as they watched and scavenged for food. The cross roads is where life communicated, moved and gathered. It was were the young woman shopped and had friends.

Out of ear shot others said she was dirty, crazy and not worthy but she did not need to hear to know they said these things, she had heard it all before. Living out of town did not help, but a Muslim mother and a Hindu father was enough reason for people to persecute. These same people these brothers and sisters in arms, holding, hiding and fighting in the first line offensive ditches, they wore each others blood, sharing each others food. But that was war, where a soldier is part of an army. Now with their judgement she felt sad for them.

That was not the case for every one, Tamilya was also known to be friendly and funny And being a good worker will go along way to having good friends.

She was happy to have made it to town and pausing not saying anything she touched the buffalo under the jaw and left her in the paddock, carrying only her small bag she walked directly to the laundromat. There standing in front of the glass counter as if suddenly materialising under the old metal awning, she was greeted by a familiar smile from her old friend.

“Tamilya” he said in Tamil.

His portly shape, balled head and facial smile a very welcoming sight.

“Where have you been? Long time.” he enquired earnestly. The corners of his mouth holding the smile as his eyes softened and he approached, standing there leaning forward, with both forearms on the counter, with

no shirt and sarong rolled down at the front, sitting above his waist looking like an egg in a cup, very much like he is pregnant.

"I have come from home" she replied in Tamil.

"You left this morning, very good, it has been too long lets look at you" Tamilya blushed and her 28 years shied away but was brought back to conversation.

"And what have you been up to. What is Tamilya up to?" the laundromat asked.

"I have just arrived, I have been working, gardening, even building, off the tool shed, I am putting up a shaded area for the new young plants now. And I'm going to plow the back field and put in some posts, digging the holes.

"It is good soil, not too much clay" The laundromat said.

"Yes. I am well. Kalinga and i went to the coast last week, where we bathed at the beach and prayed at the temple."

"Really. You went to the beach last week, which temple did you go to ?"

"Saman temple" she said.

"Which one?" he asked.

"Saman temple" she said.

"Alampi?"

"no"

they have a lunch in a room that looks at the sea, presadum"

"ah yes", *says Kumaran*"

"Saman temple" Tamilya says and they look at each other.

"thats quite a way" the laundromat eventually says.

"Where is Sudah" She said.

"Sudah" he said "come"

"No i have come this far there is no point not finishing" she said

"Come. Sudah is out the back" and Tamilia walked in past Kumaran and the counter, where from the shelves the smell of fresh washed laundry, and folded clothes in cubes, all ready to be wrapped on the counter.

"Thats good your peddling along"

"I am fine, the crops are growing, it is time to harvest some mango and Kalinga's, nose is shinning, even the monsoon coming.

I needed your soothing tea i have been busy"

Kumeran shut the front metal shutter door that rattled like a train.

It had pin size spy holes and the light pierced through it.

"Look who is here" as they entered the sparse spare room where Sudah sat on a mat with flora and powders and paste placed around

her. From facing the back door sitting crossed legged the lady dropped one knee and spiralled up with her arms out wide. They hugged.

“How about i make some tea” she said automatically sliding into her green rubber slippers.

Yes a little, some tea. Please. I have some mangoes

“Oh wonderful, my tree is not ready yet. I remember your father and I planting those seedlings all those years ago” he said. “They are a good thing plants, timeless, especially the food ones. Trees will keep defying gravity whilst their fruit falls”

“Thats good I have some here for you. They are not all ripe but some are and the others will be soon”.

Tamilyia placed her small bag on the red straw mat and began to remove half a dozen mangos of two different varieties.

“So you have been gardening and now farming, look at the results”.

Sudah said.

I don't know if i can be a farmer, I know those monsoons to be harsh and loosing it all in a storm would exhaust me, but the garden is growing, and when my cow is by my side i trust that I am doing my best. It feels right to be eating mangoes i helped to grow” Tamilyia said.

“Of course why not, your mangoes are the best!”

“Daddy planted them, he looks after them all i need to do is.

I collect them, there are many this year and full of juice they are too delicious for words, said Tamilyia”.

The smile drifted from the laundromats mouth as he looked and listened, his eyes were still soft.

“Well these do look too good and perfect” The laundromat picked up a large green mango that had a natural black mango sap atop and took a big sniff, he smiles big and passes it to his wife.

“Thank-you my dear”.

“You are wearing your mothers watch, it looks beautiful on your wrist. Did you get Cheran to fix it, he is the only one i would trust for that job”. With her arm loose she rolled her wrist.

“No i know what the time is”

Sudah clicked the stove to on and poured water from a jug into the pot that was already on the stove.

“You look truely cared for” Sadah said.

“Now lets look at you taller and smarter I think” He said as he reached under the counter.

“And your Sari i have it of course, it is ready for your next big date.”

He knew there was no assignation but they both like to think that the dress would be put to good use. It was placed on the the newspaper just south of centre, checked and admired before the newspaper was folded and tucked in at the ends, with such care and loose precision that if the paper were coloured it would look ready for a bow. He slid the package across the glass counter and smiled some more. she felt tingles of care through her body as she watched him put the sari into her small bag. He then moved across and prepared a heart shaped betel nut leaf. He then placed a chunk of betel nut, sliced and crumbled, in the centre of the leaf, he folded the leaf and smeared catechu on it. The pink paste intensified the spice and flavour of the betel nut in his mouth. His mouth was full.

“A few days, thats when it will rain, what do you think the weather is doing?” he said and then continued bout the mornings puja in the back of the shop, briefly closing his eyes in front of Shiva, then he moved to place small flowers with white petals in a shallow bowl of water.

“How are you Kormeran?” she asked.

He chewed the bettlenut to the side of his mouth.

“I am good, still surprised when i look in the mirror and see my old face”.

“Raduraj is going to be a father, Aarohi is having a baby” Sudah beamed and bent over and moved some flora for processing.

“Yes yes very good, very good news, but it will be Aarohi having the baby like a moaning animal.”

“Tamilya” Sudah said

“They are beautiful, his wife makes me laugh I haven't seen them for very long.” Tamilya said “Yes, yes very good news. A grandmother. And a grandfather! Your Puja is working old man.”

“Old? Not according to my calculations” said Kumeran

“And I'm not taller either” she smiled back.

“And Kumaran is thinking of going back to university”

“Really what to study?”

“Biology.” Kumeran said

But you know more than most, even the professors.

“I suppose I have the books, but, not the piece of paper, I never finished even when the university was much smaller. What got me thinking was not more than a couple of years ago at a large afternoon tea, with food supplied by Thirunelvely University. One of the directors invited me to grand opening, the new wing for the science department. You don't know him, he has always worked at the campus. And and the minister of

education was there and all number of people, most of them idiots. But my friend the director, he made it very clear that there was no age limit and if I could pay the fees there would be a position there for me to study. He told me my experience and knowledge would be an asset to the college. And I would be welcome.”

“Would be welcome” she said.

“Where is Kalinga? Lets have a look at her, i have carrots” he said.

The laundramt lead as they walked back through the store to open the shutters where they both looked out. Tamiliya brought her hands up and called across the road to the grazing buffalo in the field. Kalinga raised her neck and shook its head, the big droopy ears moved like plates loosely around the long and high buffalo horns, the large dark eyes maintained focus absolutely on Tamiliya. Then the cow raised its nose to the sky. Water gathered where the cow stood. The edge of the cross roads were raised just enough for the traffic and caught the recent rain so now the grass had greenness. A grasshopper flew directly onto the cows nose where it was caught on the half volley and quickly enveloped by her long rough curling tongue.

“Kalinga likes a long walk and when we do she smiles at me, i know she means it, she does more work than me you know”.

“She is plenty big, you have done the hard work, you have done what that buffalo does. And your cow could never do what you do. you have resolve, my dear it is in your dna. Plenty of work is a blessing and a privilege, like getting old and with the rains and the crops, you and your cow have many busy days ahead.”

They looked to the horizon.

“Always crows, always talking to each other, so smart they are.

All creatures have hearts even that spider. And lungs. But those crows, well all the birds lungs are different to ours, their lungs are twice as effective as us mammals. Using the same air they are twice as efficient, sure at the cost of the heart that beats us, yes. But the breath is what unites all consiousness. That butterfly has lungs too. And we all have a heart and we all have ears and eyes as you see. But I hear the conversations the crows have. They have patience and belief and that builds connection.”

“To the flock?”

“Yes to each other, but they have patience, on many things they play, they are efficient so there are many of them, I know there is more, they gather on auspicious days at the temple but not in competition. And they

need faith to fly from the nest. That allows them to see. I have seen the hesitation as they ready to leave the nest, practicing their wing beats before finally letting go and flying to the unknown. They learn the lore of the land quickly. They have no choice they are still too stupid to move to the edge of the forest. And if you ask the street dogs what they know of the streets, they will look at you with resolute eyes that were not there when they were puppies. They are happier dogs outside of town, but these dogs are too old to change.

We have evolved this way, nothing has changed.

But mercy is given to allow survival in this suffering hell. All living things that you find above the ground are constantly just trying to stay alive. Always on alert to when it will happen. Death or survival.

“Death or survival” she said.

“That’s right and mixed in with mostly ignorance.

The right man will come for you Tamilya. I feel you will find your man and he will surrender to you”. he said.

“I know I sometimes feel it too” Tamiliya said “Oh I know I would make a very good wife, if the gods were to be kind we can do more than survive, together we can even save a little money, and build a nice house with brick walls and wooden floors that is always dry, but Kalinga would have a dirt floor but a nice roof. See I couldn’t do the work without that cow. She has some getup and go. But she is very fond of sitting in the reeds.”

“Of course, we all are at times”

They move back inside and the noisy rail of the rolling door being shut identified the strong security.

Sudah was sitting working.

“Have you eaten, I will get some breakfast brought down” the wife said.

“No I am going to sit at the restaurant, I am ready for their breakfast and I may not have that ease with the monsoon rains imminent.”

I plant and harvest mango, and give those fruits as offerings to all the gods, and then the fruits get passed back to me. But I do nothing for the rains they just happen. The monsoon rains come with the glory of Laxshmir. And too much or too little can wreak havoc like Kali with a sharpened sword. So I do little for adding water to the fields, in a way she does everything.”

“And how are you” said Tamiliya

“Oh things have been up and down, especially since we are now living up stairs” Sudah said.

To that they laughed at the pleasantness of life.

"It's been a long time. I miss seeing that beautiful face of yours" the wife said "your good company is always welcome at home too."

She paused and looks at Tamilya.

"Please call for December we can all go into the carnival swings, Aarohi won't go on them because of our news but we can all go together, there will be food and sweets." Sudah said.

Then Kumeran said. "Is the solar energy going?"

the left side of Tamilya's face raised as she replied,

"Thank you Kumeran, yes, the solar, thank you it is wonderful. I have cool drinks in the afternoon and a fan for the hot hot nights. And a light."

Tamiliya looked at the sewing machine next to the pot with the clear lid that was about to boil.

"The pot has bubbles" she said "I might buy some tools I want to run a drill from the solar."

She looks at her two hands.

"You made me understand that". She said. And ran her thumb along tips of her fingers.

"That's a good idea, just get the drill with the low amps and do it on a sunny day" he said as he moved the pot and poured the boiled water into a tea pot to make spiced tea. The water fizzed and steam rose into the high beamed and planked ceiling.

The lady continued to work on the spices and asked "Did you get some of that rain? The strange clouds were illusive, looking so promising but it did not last. The bees would like some rain "

"No rain at home but further out? I do not have confirmation but it looked like there was rain maybe three or two days ago, I am starting planting for the first time in the back fields tomorrow."

The laundromats wife, Sudha helped Tamiliya get the lease for the new land. They were all confident it was a very good block of land which had been well rested and now ready to grow.

"Yes the planting does not do it self. Would you like some honey"

he said as he got a full teaspoon for the tea

"Yes Kumeran"

He often helped her acknowledge good things in life. And to see her smile.

It was unusual for people to have honey, but at home Kumeran had a backyard, full with every shade of green, and a bee hive under a tulsii tree. And the tree would do its dance, all the small leaves moving as one large light sheet, the silky green foliage shimmered in the wind. He was an unusual man with skills, and many people cared for his conversation,

and he cared but no longer out of duty. The old woman had moved the branches and bowls to one corner and they each sat cross legged on the mat with some biscuits and the tea. They slurped the hot tea and enjoyed the comfortable silence.

It was pleasant to be on the mat out the back and to drink tea again and sit.

The young woman was holding her cup and thinking of the future.

“Tamilya there are people wanting land, two men are in town, I heard they are surveyors looking for land close to your new fields.” Kumeran said

“yes the new fields to the east, are very good” she reconfirmed to herself, “Its going to be a wonderful garden there, even if the rains don't come this month. They will come. If the rain doesn't come I will build a small shack for when there is reason to stay after work and sleep and pray and watch the rain soak into the ground knowing there is food on the way. It always rains.”

“There are men who may want to rent the land from you”

“That is the land you rented me”

“They offered us 27 times its value, they want to build a new development”

“no, what was it, can you repeat it” she said

“of course”

And Kumeran explained again, explaining the easy option.

“i do not know. There is freedom in the land, in the wind in the animals in in the waterholes in the jungle, there is freedom, it calls to me, and with family and good people, out there, for me and you. Tamilya said.

“And that’s why because the idea of going out to farm on the land, i have never felt more free ”

In moments she saw both sides of what the land offered and knew that the easy option was to take the quick option. But she loved that land.

“If the rain does not fall if it stays in the clouds there will be no crops just rain in the sky, but i would not care, i now have enough grain for months more grain than i have ever had, the soaking rain is late, if it does not rain what has grown will perish and the hard work will be for nothing.

And i would happily take those hard days to have days of freedom on that land with Kalinga. And it will rain, and when it does I can make and lay bricks. I cannot risk handing it over. There is much freedom in the land” she says with realisation.

“the moon changes to fast” Tamilya said.”What ever the end result there is good reason to plant tomorrow for the cost in the long run will be small. I will need those saplings for planting”

They spoke nothing more of the opportunity.

“Your timing is good. I spoke to the (garden supplies) just three days ago and there are all of the plants. How are you? Did you get some of that rain?

What plants came in?

I have the banana saplings we spoke of last time, and the Tumeric and Ginger and the woodapple sapplings. Your timing is always good”. He said.

“Oh goodness thank you Komeran”

“Yes good idea Tamilya. The banana saplings, i will have them brought around from the home” Komeran said.

“No I can pick them up.” she said

“It is best with an auto, one trip”

She finished her tea smiling not wanting the short walk down the sometimes busy road.

“Thank you. I will see you soon” she said (in tamil)

Leaving for one of the two resturants.

“Leave space for some mango and cream” the laundromat says.

She walked into the back lane that lead to a noisy road with traffic, the large trucks with polished wooden side panels drove past with excessive speed, sounding their loud horns several times before passing the intersection. The dust swirled and she walked with confidence with her decision, she crossed in-between a bicycle and a lorry her sari leaving a short trail like a peacock without display.

And flowed into the entrance of the second restaurant between two glass cabinets in opposition, one with fried snacks the other side a cooking station that was not in operation, she continued through the door at the back, to where the wash basin was there for all.

The hungry workers, farmers, traders, men of various caste and religion sat and ate in the small eating house. There were also two foreigners sitting and eating. They were the only people who were not locals and they stood out. One man because he was Sinagales and the other because he was using a spoon. And when Tamilyia walked in she was the only woman. She sat at the back at a vacant table under an oscillating fan looking out towards the road. The smoke filled restaurant served easy portions of dahl, poppers and roti on plates lined with

plastic, a process she had made a necessity for her own use at home when there was no rain.

She sits and before she is settled a waiter places food on the table, one server with three joined tall round metal containers with dhal, chutney and a coconut sambal that was orange and her favourite accompaniment to the dahl.

“Pakora” she says to the waiter. She surveyed the room once and knew no one apart from the staff. Then with a feeling of being looked at she paused, scanned the room again and she saw the youngest man in the room staring. Magnetised the two barefaced Sri Lankans looked at each other. Hypnotised by their own eyes, unmediated connection. The side of her vision strained to her heart. The young woman spine muscles tensed her heart rate increased, with her breath in her throat. Tamiliya was now in the headlights of lust/desire/want.

She watched as he looked down at his circling fingers preparing another handful of food, she opened her lips her saliva ran down the side of her tongue, the taste of metal filled her mouth. A stack of four pakora arrives and it brings her back to having breakfast. At the same time the young man looks back up and they catch more than each others eyes, the young woman swallowed heavy, the handsome young man and the unknown feelings caught her off guard, she had no time to think of what was happening. She was dizzy and could notice her short breath in her chest, she could feel the hair on her arms and the back of her head and her belly move now as she breathed. At that moment her eyes slimmed and her cheeks pull back to a smile. And his eyes lit to smile together.

She didn't know what to do, she ordered a roti. She knew it was silly being nervous but she played along with the nerves and smiled to herself.

The play was mysterious and she felt it in her abdominals. Tamiliya had never seen anyone in a restaurant who she had been attracted to.

She put the dahl and sambal on the plastic coated plate and grabbed a pakora. It was flakey, making it easy to pull apart, the flat bread were fresh and hot. She wanted to look at him again, so she did.

“she orders a roti” written in Tamil. (“she orders another roti” tamil she says)

She rocked her hip back on the seat and her upper body followed, but she sat nervous fingering her food. Her mind osolated like the fan above. And her eyes and head kept coming back to him, she drew at her base he made her wet.

The food arrived, she had to concentrate to relax and focus. And she did, she dropped her shoulders down, Her right arm extended and her fingers twisted and tore the pokera into loose large flakes for the filling. Sitting at the table nervous but safe she looked at the handsome young man again. What was this feeling? Her body and mind had never reacted so strongly with such a strange response.

Without even knowing it she gave a longing look, and when they caught each others eyes, she looked away. Her right hand unexpectedly shook, then automatically her fingers began to work the food on the plate in circles. Her eyes darted then peered up again and eye gazed with the young man. The food was well massaged, then the small sized portion grasped by the tips of her fingers was push into her mouth from the thumb behind. They continued to look at each other. She was like an alert cobra as she chapped her lips together, there was no big taste, no usual big hit of chilli. But she could feel her smile in her cheeks.

The other man at the table had his back to her.

From 4 metres away and a 30 degree angle Tamiliya had a good view of the handsome young man, and she liked the fine features of his face, his eyes were slightly glazed and brown with savvy. His thick hands showed he was overweight and wearing a ring on his thumb, in his ear but not on his ring finger and that made him attractive and attainable. The young man looked down at his phone and then would peep a look at Tamilyia whilst maintaining connection to the conversation with the older man.

“Not me” The young man replied from the side of is mouth “you driving”. “It’s a lot harder out here than they understand, just do what i say, that is what you are here for” the old man said.

The young man went back to his phone. Then looked back up to see Tamilya feeding herself and he smiled whilst taking a sip of tea.

So began their longest mutual forbidding look, not as intense as the first look they shared, but they both finished with a cheeky smile that showed their good teeth.

She sensed where this was going, nowhere. And she stopped smiling to herself. They had no mutual friends nor did they speak the same language, and she was never going to approach him and he would have no time for her.

The two men sat there talking after their meal.

“Are you controlled by remote? Head office don't know whats going on here, i know what’s going on here, i know you can understand me, we already had that conversation with your boss”

“I stay more time on weekend i need money” the handsome man said.
“alright” the old man replied.”Dont forget to give me your invoice, your bill”

The handsome young man did not turn his head.

“So that the company can pay you.”

This time the young man did turn his head and said “we meet time was 6 oclock afternoon. Everyday, at six you give yes, money. If no money bye bye.”

“i got your money and your bosses money, calm down,” The old man said

Tamilya sipped her tea and stared, the two men had finished their meals and conversation. The full laminex table messy with empty bottles and plates, the chairs reverberated loudly as they got up. She liked the look of his cargo shorts and collard business shirt, with the shape of his back, there was size and strength to his stance. She wanted him, to talk to him, more than she wanted anything, she wanted him. She stared at his movements that seemed in slow-motion, and watched as his lips tried to say unfamiliar words to the waiter. And that ended with a smile from the handsome young man, the young woman smiled too, coyly to herself.

The older man then settled it quickly with a very large bill. That leaving enough space for the two minds to lock, then it all ended in slow motion in the most *unmemorable* way.

She watched as they crossed the road to a 4wd that was parked obtusely, but bad parking is not a problem until it is a problem.

Tamilya sat there quite still as the chaos of the intersection continued.

Had he gone, had he really gone? The car drove off with the traffic. She sat alone. And felt the sharp taste of chilli now hard to swallow.

She stared and did nothing other than finish her breakfast and think of the young man, the clothes he was wearing, how she wanted to hear him laugh and feed him some of her sweet potato curry, kiss him, rip her shirt and later mend it. The table was cleared and with it all trace of him vanished. She sat with sadness and wondered how she would ever find her man. She remembered fantasising about nameless men, faces from after the war, unknown faces, one from a bus ride and another man at a temple that was forceful and violent. But this was different, this left her body aching, she went on staring at her food remnants. She knew the handsome young man was Singalese, and that was his failing, she thought. That was her failing. Why are my desires not what I want? She questioned maybe he comes from the west and was not in the army. It is

finished now, she thought how strange it would be to find his breath against her ear, how strange to be held and squeezed and tickled, how to kiss and look deeply into his eyes. How? she thought She was to scared to question incase there was no answer. She gazed at her right hand, cupped and empty, fingers curled with dried curry on the tips, her hand heavy on the table.

She too had finished her meal quickly and had no reason to stay, she got up and washed her hands and had a rare long look at herself in the mirror. Then went to the counter to pay. Whilst she remembered to order the rice and curry, her mind was insistent with the young man, thinking of any trace he may have left, there was none, he was gone.

“You ate enough breakfast?” the server asked

Tamilyia showed no emotion, agreeing and ordered more samosas and fried food and paid for the lot with a small note.

The friendly server finishing the transaction with a smile handing her the change and a plastic bag with the takeaway food.

The largest store at the intersection was on the corner and a large corrugated awning that extended over the footpath shaded food in open hessian sacks, with staples of white rice, dahl and blushing crimson chillies. The chillies would help keep her handsome young man clear and healthy she thought this was good and speculated she was in love. The shop owner sat on a high stool behind the counter, usually selling single cigarettes with single word conversation. “Goldleaf” and with 50 rupee and a head tilt the transaction was complete. He smiled when he saw Tamilyia

“Vanakkam” she said

Vanakkum was his reply

“I have a list, food and building supplies”

“Your cow better not eat any more of my grain” the store keeper said.

“can i leave the list with you so that i can come around the back to load my cart”

The store keeper continued to chew the toothpick in the corner of his mouth, checks the list and nods with a loose head shake, he turns his head and calls loudly “MACHA!”

Plastic flour sacks were sowed together to form a curtain and when it was not drawn it divided a side room like an angled guillotine. The boy comes out of that single room where an old woman with strong small hands sat hunched and still. Tamilyia had only seen her on the edge of

the bed, no one else knew how lucid and sad she was. Other people's alcohol and wars showed the cost.

The old woman neither turned her head nor made eye contact.

Although Tamilya never had a problem with the store keeper she was never greatly fond of the man, she saw him as required because he always had the supplies that was needed. She politely smiled and left. Tamilya felt the sun and its power as it gained height, she crossed the street and walked through the shade of the trees that swayed over the high paling fence of the narrow back alley that lead to the laundromats back gate. Both the wife and the laundromat were there. A slight head wobble from everyone made everything comfortable, shown through each of their smiley faces. Sudah opened the back gate a little more then leaned on her left leg with her hip holding the large tall entry gate that moved with her balance, her thin dark lips showing white teeth bridging high cheeks. So content her tilting head made her look like a proud mother.

The laundromat organised 4 short plastic stools tucked way, hidden behind the shelving at the front entrance.

The wife went to the small fridge where she served spiced mango and curd and added banana to three bowls. To eat the sweet curds the three of them sat on stools at the back of the store where it was coolest. The bright glare of the sunshine and darkness of the cooler room gave them comfort with total privacy.

"i have the saplings" he looked at his watch "i will have them brought around from (sons name) in 30 minutes"

"So you went to the beach at Saman thats quite a way *region*. *The laundromat said with thickness in his voice.*

Tamiyia. Are you looking to rescue another cow? Its treacherous there, thats where you had to rescue Kalinga from the bandits, I would hate to hear you had anything more to do with them, your bravery may not be rewarded like last time if you you see those men again"

"No, one Kalinga is enough."

She remembered only the good things from the incident, it was when she stood up

"I had to do something she was tethered and being beaten."

Tamilya, saved Kalinga,

"i do love how you adapt to your environment, you are a dear river like the ganga flowing with the land. I can see it in these mangos. And the fruits yet to be, the banana saplings that are on their way, your

consistent progress is leading you to be a great farmer, it is work of low acclaim but will give you every thing you need.”

“The soil is very good, perhaps, i can grow my beloved good and strong?”

“Something great will come from working on land, peace with harmony. Let sunshine into your heart” Sudah said.

Then handed her a wooden box with a terracotta container with a cork top

“Devotion to Vishnu?”

Kumeran said. “And Devotion to your dreams, you cannot be given initiative and you have taken plenty, you are moving like a healthy river, it is unrevealed where this or any land will lead you.

“I have more things to load, i will be back with Kalinga. Thankyou Kumeran, thank you Sudah ”

In the shade with the heavy heat of the still morning she scrapped and scooped the last of the amber liquid, it tasted fresh and sweet and made her ready for the haze.

Tamilya approached the cow with a soft whistle who was extended and reaching around to her rump combing her short hair with her tongue, but was struggling as she was hindered by her long horn. The buffalo straightened up and began walking toward Tamilya.

“Are we ready to go?” Kalinga asked

“Almost. We have supplies to pick up and then we are on our way” she said. And smiled as the cows big eyes lovingly peered up at Tamilya, as she walked past the cow and packed her small canvas bag and the honey in the clay jug.

All items fitted securely under a canvas in the box attached to the front of the cart. The lid of the box just enough space for two to sit and ride the bumps and waves of the plains, she closed the rectangle lid with and thought of the handsome young man.

She walked back to the front of the cow and placed the palm of her hand flat on the forehead where the skin was close to the bone and the bovine hair swirled and spiralled, a good place for scratching and patting. She scratched between the horns of the large forehead and rubbed up and down the bridge of the cows nose, the short black hair that was on her forehead was printed with scars, groves in the skin like on the palm of her hand.

She remembered the time she saved Kalinga from the 3 men. The calf with her big dark eyes and young long legs, fragile and unstable with a rope around her neck, making a desperate crying sound that echoed out

of the small brick building next to the railway line. Tamilya had heard the cry and investigated, the small house with two rooms and a dim corridor that lead to a larger backroom. The three men didn't notice her until she was standing at the door way of the back room. The men were sitting at a table drinking raras and playing cards. They stopped and looked at Tamilya. One of the men smiled, it made her skin crawl, another of the men yelled "Oh look, a new toy, you can play too" he said in tamil. The calf looked at her and loudly cried "help". The third man took a short piece of 4 by 2 lumber that was leaning against the wall and smashed it down over the bridge of Kalinga's nose. Blood came out and mixed with her tears. The calf slipped and fell into its own blood that had previously congealed, on the floor. Then pulled against the rope and struggled to stand, a bloody mess flowed from her large nostrils giving her red lips. In a panic the cow backed away against the tether.

"Tell them i am from your village" the calf said.

The man with the piece of wood stood up. Tamilya surveyed the flotsam on the floor.

"The calf is from our village, others are looking with me and they will hear my scream" she said.

"They certainly will" said the smiling man as he revealed an old revolver and he placed it on the pile of dirty money on the table.

"I am one of many you will need more bullets than that gun holds" she said.

She remembered it all, particularly cutting the calf free.

Then she headed back to the shop to pick up the dried food and building materials. She realised she paid no attention to predators for a long time but the young buffalo helped her be more careful. Tamilya smoothly shifting her weight, spiralled and turned on her heel and then strode lightly to the rear of the shop. Together Kalinga and Tamilya received the supplies.

Further along across the road parked a three wheel auto, painted fire engine red with handlebars for steering. The laundromat leaned under the rounded black canvas roof that was fully loaded with banana and wood apple saplings.

"The other side of the road, we need to load the buffalo and cart."

A short break in the traffic then a u turn which was dangerous but not looked at as unreasonable even though there was a lot of honking from cars and an old high speed bus. The honking, more an indicator that they were not stopping. Then the auto was positioned behind the cart and buffalo.

In the dust and heat they began to load saplings.

Kalinga nodded her head and shook her bridle, repeating one word.

“Carrots”. She would look back only once before being told eyes front.

As Tamilyia took the final bag with ginger and turmeric from behind the drivers seat of the small auto, the laundromat swept the back seat and floor from the loose dark soil.

Kumeran approached the pair with a small brush in hand.

“Oh Kalinga what a big girl you are, and Tamilyia says your working so hard, what a good cow.”

He pulled a large carrot and fed the buffalo in such a way that people could not tell, even if some one walked close by. As he used the brush to sweep the cows neck she safely curled her neck against Kumeran knowing the exact location of the point of her horn.

“I have no more carrots for you”.

“Thank you for the wood apple and the turmeric they will grow next to some chillies and a curry tree look how wonderful my garden will be. Oh and ginger for my tea.”

“Oh you can sell ginger”

The three wheeler pattered away, Tamilyia watched the grey smoke from the exhaust that showed the breeze as it left.

“Thank you Kumeran”

Her friendly laundry man had always been her friend and between her going away for weeks at a time his face never changed nor his portly disposition but that was never going to change.

“I will take leave” She said.

“Tamilya your great days are too few, and difficult ones too much.

It has not been your fault but you cannot have the pleasure without pain. I think you will find it. But what’s the point if you make yourself invisible to the world.

I want to live where i live. She said

“who will see you hiding away, unless you are happy to be seen by only the few. Go see what goes on in the city. As a Kshatriyas, your bravery and forces defies my sight. Let the life without the adrenalin and tears flow like the river, flow on your path. Everything will work out. Your smile is warmth and will dry the tears fine. You can burry much of the important but don't bury your problems, you keep nurturing your own beliefs, feel the benefits of looking, deeply listen to where it hurts. having made it through the other side having dealt with all that shit makes a tree all sorts of stronger. Trees have bad days. And if they don't endure then that variation of that tree are weak or dead. The human activity is

the same, use it for something that nourishes your human spirit, something beyond, extending like the end branches of a tree, investigating like the tiny claws of a mantis. We should be allowed to explore and understand. We stood up to be educated and for equality. You have seen such horribleness, far worse than your fears. Mean people are more likely to lose whatever control and when you're in their presence there are no signs of their ridiculousness and they come like a train in the night with no bells and light to warn. Driving themselves into darker places”

The wife appeared with another terracotta container of fruits and sweets it was originally a curds container sold on street corners at night. And seeds in a small plastic bag.

“This is for you dear I made these sweets yesterday and there is a selection of vegetable seeds mixed in small plastic bags, if you have time to plow some additional lines they will be good in a few months. Soak them they will make a difference.”

“When will I learn how to meet a man.”

“There are the 18 things a woman can do to attract a man”

“will you teach me dear Sudah” she said

“or you can ask him for his phone number” the laundromat said. “your man will come, and your life will be as the stars say .”

They saw the war time as a time in the sun with celebrated victories together fighting for what was right.

Tamiliya thought of the handsome young man and wished she was brave and smart enough to have his number.

“We almost held that state” she said “and why? so that we kept our language that was never threatened, but at the time it was critical for us to walk free in the gardens. We had been betrayed by our country too much.” Kumeran said.

“Oh please stop filling her head with your intention, let your darling go and allow her to appreciate what she has already created. There is nothing more than this. Look, a lovely Kalinga, so lovely.” Sudah said.

“The bitter nightmares become blank with Kalinga” she said

Tamiliya packed the terracotta container below the seat and took out an umbrella and with the leather bridle in her fingers she walked back to Kumeran and Sudah.

“Tamiliya you have never stopped being extra ordinary.” Sudah said.

God bless they both say to Tamiliya, the wife touched her hand and hugged her warmly, the laundromat envelopes Tamiliya’s hand in both of his and they smile fondly at each other. And with the cart loaded she

smoothly opens the umbrella and began the walk home. Once they found momentum, one final wave to each other as the laundromat finished re-opening the front of the shop. She was comforted and surprised.

“I really made a mistake”

“we all make mistakes”

“No but this was a massive mistake and yet a very small one at the same time. There was nothing to lose, and i stayed seated when i was scared, i could have taken action.”

I know, but who you still have feelings for him

how could i i don't know him ?

I am just surprised, I'm over him, he is gone and i will probably never see him again. i fell in love and now it is finished. If i want to fall in love i must practice.”

Practice what?” the cow said

“falling”

Tamilya, held the leather strap connected to the bridle, she liked the constant connection that gave, an alternating current with the paces, holding, knowing the feeling of her dear friend at the end, every slight move a reassurance of safety. Although holding the strap whilst walking was unnecessary and unconscious the young woman felt alone without that connection feeling the slight sway with each pace and the subtle weight of the leather in her hand moving between her thumb and fingers. With the slightest touch usually soft swinging motion, a romantic connection was maintained that defied concentration. Both of them knew immediately when that physical connection was lost through a jolt of aloneness. But today as they began the walk home with all business taken care of, she reflect how she was more content than ever.

“Perhaps falling isn't as bad as i thought.”

And under the shade of the umbrella and the strap in the right hand they comfortably walked through the junction turning back westward towards the trees and the shimmering line on the horizon.

“They are a good bag of carrots” the cow said

“And i thought those big eyes of yours were just for me” Tamilya teased,

“And i can smell banana”

“Yes, 27 banana saplings for tomorrows planting, not for the ready yet but that will be a different story in 8 months we will have bags full of bunches of bananas to milk”

“And some for me ?”

“Of course, you are carrying the load, they are your bananas too. The boarder line of the new property will have plenty of bananas, you can eat plenty, we will have no more banana shortages from spring”.

I can eat plenty

The buffalo was doing her best to control her excitement but could not and the next step was followed but a hop with all four legs that rocked the cart as if going over a speed hump

The cart rocked with no ill effects to the contents, the white flour sack heavy with rice, sugar, salt, flour, spices and other dry food sitting at the front against the head board with the other supplies of building materials with the saplings comfortably wedged in behind. The strap swung and Tamilia smiled

The young woman knew she would not be back to town for weeks and she left the murder of squawking crows behind.

“moo” the cow said.

Tamiliya agreed with silence.

They walked upon the iridescent plain with a dusty track that remained behind as they walked the continuous mile. The large hills got closer but not bigger as the pair had walked leisurely through the heat of the day. The large rainbow coloured umbrella that had patches where the corners and the top point had worn, an assortment of silk patches, glued and stitched but the umbrellas web maintained its form. It was used more as protection against the suns rays, rather than from the heavy rain, so the holes didn't matter she thought. The umbrellas usefulness was secondary its value was in its initial spark, it had been given to Tamilya by Komeran when Kalinga was but a calf, when Kalinga was so small they both enjoyed the shade it provided.

The plains were dotted with spiky scrubs and after mid day clouds of dust blew with the hot wind across the land, this was only a small part of the harshness, but that alone could drain the life out of you, leaving you only with the sound of your heartbeat in your head. So they took a different route to what they originally intended where the breeze from the trees gave reprieve and the heat tailed off after the first hill. She straddled the cow and rode towards the distant monsoon clouds. The umbrella provided some shade for the cow too, the other hand still held the dusty leather strap.

Experience and knowledge were essential to make it to her destination where the day was more forgiving with the afternoon breeze from the trees.

“this field is near my favourite watering hole near where i learnt to swim”

“you don't learn to swim you were given it. The skill is innate, for you, you didn't learn how to swim you were born with that knowledge.” she said. “How would I teach you to swim my dear bovine, I do not know myself”

And as many times as as she had told her dear friend she never remembered what was innate. But Tamilya never thought twice about explaining such things.

“Can we have carrots at the water hole”?

“Well your favourite watering hole is not my favourite pastime but you have been quite the star of the team miss moo. Again so a treat is in order. So yes some carrots with the afternoon sun at the waterhole, you can play crocodile and can go in up to your nose.”

And so she did. After removing the straps and cart, the buffalo lowered to standing on her front knees first and then sat completely next to the waterhole. The gentle slope enabled an easy afternoon hug. The young woman splayed along the buffaloes neck and each looked through the reeds as though they were crocodiles. Jaw to jaw.

“Are you going to pretend you are a crocodile?”

“Yes i am a very scary crocodile”

Then the buffalo stood and continued to chew from one of her stomachs and wandered through the grassy reeds that sank deep into the water.

In the long afternoon sun there was no looking up at the horizon, Tamiliya smiled as she breathed in and raised her head to view the long horizon, the monsoon clouds, the scrubs and the land in-between there was to much glare when the sun was low and when her hand was under the brim of her hat, the glare was still too much. The breeze blew and the small birds flew against the wind and went to another bush a little further away.

Tamiliya watched, the rain was on the horizon and that smell was in the air from the fields in the distance, things were comfortable in the heat with shimmering lakes that didn't exist, today there are only mirages.

“” she said.

We must harvest

Yes. The rains are still coming but trust i am alongside and you are not stepping into this without knowing its depth. You have your favourite crocodile with you.

The cow said before closing her nostrils and and fully submerging herself, coming up soon after, rising from the mud as gracefully as she had disappeared

Tamiliya struck a match and lite some incense.

“the flame represents the energy from the sun, that bit of wood that created that amount of heat, that wood is a representation of the energy captured by the trees photosynthesis. The sun cared for those trees to make that flame. You growing bananas you are a flame. You are a flame you are the the power of the sun, but younger, softer and more beautiful, walking around like a hard upsidown seed pod, you look quite funny. the cow said before disappearing again.

Tamiliya frowned as she relaxed and remembered the cow so young and stupid. The young woman would tie a carrot to string and then to the end of a stick. The cow would jumped excitedly and ineffectually to both of their delight, when she was still young enough to do such things. “You are strong and wiser than you were yesterday and i love you”. the cow said and groaned moo

The small birds returned and bounced in the branches of the small tree that was gave her shade and was propping up her shoulder. The young woman wanted to be with the handsome young man. She closed her eyes and saw the two of them laying on the long grasses, using his body to get comfortable in the shade and singing
Ennavale Adi Ennavale, -Oh my dear! oh my dear! I have lost my heart.

supporting the back of his hand with her palm while clapping the beat with the palm of her other hand. And they would smile at each other and he would put small flowers in her hair, she thought she want to touch him now. She felt comfortable on the dry grass bed so sleepy and adjusted, her loose cloth on the floor of the land and laid down flat. Her body fitting into the bumps of the earth. With soft eyes she saw beyond the dried grasses, and water birds, to the afternoon clouds of the monsoon not moving slowly, high in the Sri Lankan sky. With closed eyes she saw beyond.

For forty minutes she slept which was usually not her desire or privilege. The last of the suns rays shone on the young woman, she was a youth, a dessert flower.

Through the mud at the surface of the water hole snorting bubbles of the cow’s exhalation spurted like a whale taking a shallow dive, she woke

the young woman, bringing Tamiliya to slowly, sadly open her eyes in time to see the salmon sunset, with the large monsoon clouds that had not moved, only changed shape. There is nothing I can do now she thought he has gone.

“Enough” Tamilyia said. It took very little too ready and leave.

“Do you remember when i first got you? you were such a small buffalo. I saved you and feed you and you were mine. Holy holy my face softened when i looked at your upward looking eyes, I wonder what took me to you. It could have been any animal but it was you my dear friend.”

The cow loved her every day after that. She slapped the side chest of the beast as they walked into the last of the days sun on the horizon.

“The back garden be ready for working next week? What shall we plant there? More vegetables or something more exotic?”

Yes a bit of both they both agreed.

“maybe more bananas”

“And carrots”

“I wonder what seed will grow from Sudah’s packet”

“Its ok we will grow them as a simple surprise” Kalinga said.

But Kalinga really just wanted to plant bananas and carrots. The discussions of a better future was timeless and could go on any time of the day or night .

The sun had sunk when they arrived home. The land was flat with the large areas of wet land making the landscape both productive and beautiful. With dynamic reptiles and all types of water birds. Parrots fly through the air for the last time today as the bats left from a tree near her cottage, the obligatory coconut trees lined the distant horizons / boundaries

The first evening star was twinkling as the the food supplies were unloaded, the saplings and poles remained in the cart.

The first star final whisper of the dusk, from her pillow, her head heavy.

The lamp on the alter flickered, it is the last thing Tamiliya sees through the reflection on the tarnished mirror, before closing her eyes for sleep.

....

The cows nose jewelled with dew. there were patches of long grasses.
Maybe you are right were you are supposed to be

we are still walking there must be someone for everyone

We will just keep rolling on these plains keeping those wheels turning.
Making the hills roll away, on the way to the crossroads. So with the
weather on our side hopefully we will harvest a full cart load of mangos,
bananas and coconuts and maybe a box of woodapples in three weeks
we must have faith Laskshmi will be generously smiling on us, that will
be good for the monsoon month. After the monsoon we can dream
away afternoons at this water hole or absorb the beauty of the new back
lands. But i don't want to do it all alone but i will make it work.