Touching Earth

Rani Manicka

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Nutan

Dawn was breaking over the hills when I opened the miniature wooden doors of our ancestral shrine. Into the exposed niches I placed coconut-leaf containers of fruit, flowers and cakes. In the trees, bushes and vegetation, everything was quiet and still. I lit incense sticks. In the cool fragrant air I closed my eyes and brought my palms to meet – and the world fell away. I could have remained thus for a whole hour, but for a sudden burst of childish laughter beyond the garden walls. In that wisp of sound, just for an instant, she had shimmered. I snapped awake.

It was not her. Of course it was not.

I stood frozen and staring at my clasped hands. The knuckles were white. It couldn't be her . . . but I was tearing across the hardened earth, scrambling up the wall, my feet instinctively finding the familiar crevices in the uneven stones. Over the wall I saw them. Two little girls, no more than four or five years old dazzling in their dancing costumes, great helmets of finely worked gold-leaf bouncing and glittering in the early light. By our entrance gate their bare feet crushed the fruit rind the squirrels had discarded during the night. Then they rounded the corner and were gone.

I heaved myself up onto the wall, and sat, unthinking, my fingers caressing the velvet moss carpeting the stones, my eyes on the tiny creatures scurrying inside a crack in the wall, and suddenly the past returned. Innocent and undefeated by the day I had slumped to a filthy floor in a

squalid London flat, and surrounded by uncaring strangers, died.

I stared at it, tantalised. How completely untouched it was by loss. How magnificent we all were. A molten gold sun was setting and my sister and I were dancing to Mother's string instrument, the *sape*. With her deformed right leg tucked under her buttocks and the other drawn up to her slender body Ibu, our mother, attained the grace denied her during the day, standing and walking.

And I saw Father too, his hair long and still black, worn in the knot of a priest, squatting by a row of bell-shaped cages. Lovingly he fed corn kernels to his prize fighting cockerels. He was a puppeteer and a highly skilled ventriloquist. Actually a star of some repute. His shows were in such demand that he was often away for long periods, travelling from village to village performing with his two hundred or so leather-covered puppets. I was terribly proud of him then. Yet, in the shining bubble, it was Nenek, our grandmother, whom I saw most clearly. She sat on the steps of her living compartment, her fathomless black eyes half-obscured but intent and watching through the milky-grey smoke ascending from her clove cigarettes.

Ah, the past, that enchanted harmful fairy tale.

Tears splashed on my arms. I touched them. Fetched from a well of sorrow. If I could only reach out for the past. Catch it. I had smashed it up needlessly. Careless, careless. How vast was my carelessness. See now what is left over from yesterday.

The sun had come up over the hills. A spotted green and grey frog leaped into a cluster of banana trees, and I jumped off the wall restlessly. Yes, I will tell you everything, but not here. Not in this high garden of bright flowers, and trees drooping with clusters of ripe fruit. Here I would be accused of sentimentalising the past. The right home for my story is in the temple of the dead. There I will

be forgiven. Transience is expected. It is not far from here, a marvellous place where time ceases. Its gates are intricately carved and guarded day and night by giant volcanic stone figures.

But wait, if I tell all, leave nothing out, and your travels bring you to my paradise island one day will you promise that if you see me, sarong-wrapped, and dusky, you will never call my name? For your glance of recognition will hurt. Like excrement on a flower, it will awaken the pointing finger and shame, oh God, such shame. How people will talk!

You see, in paradise a name come to harm trembles without remedy. One is required to go to great lengths to defend a reputation. Of course, I can hardly bring myself to care any more, but there are other members of my family to think of and protect.

Come, once we go past the open marketplace in the centre of the village, you can see it.

Here we are. Look. Didn't I tell you how fabulous the temple doorway is? Take your shoes off. Even this early in the morning the flagstones will already be warm. A dog will never set foot in here, but cats, they come and go as if it were home. When we were children we came here often, drawn to the eerie silence. Mortals among Gods. Hushed by a certain anxiety we tiptoed down corridors lined with life-size statues of grotesquely leering demons their tongues protruding down to their navels. But now that I am grown they emerge into my mind benign, smiling and genuine. Mortality is a game.

Here. We will sit in this patch of sunlight here, so when the disillusionment becomes too painful, our eyes may rest upon the splendour of the flame tree in full bloom, yonder. As you take my hand to draw closer do not forget your promise.

I was born twenty-four years ago in this tiny remote village. Balinese believe every child is a treasured gift from

the heavens, and my sister and I were considered the most cherished treasure of all. Identical twins. So completely adored that for the first few months we were held in permanent bodily contact with either Nenek or Ibu, so our bodies would not touch the sullied earth. Afterwards every effort was made for us to awaken to a wondrous world.

My sister and I roused to lingering kisses in our hair and the nutritious first milk of cows curdled in a pan with rock sugar. We drank lemonade made with rainwater and limes that Nenek, to soften and heighten their flavour, had rolled under her broad feet. And because it is also our belief that a child's connection to its body and this material world is tenuous, never was there an occasion when we were beaten, or even scolded.

Why then in this season of delight did I stir from confused dreams, to confront a reality that existed only with the scurrilous laughter of night animals, and the sound of tree roots stretching for water? A ridiculous insistent whisper moving from room to room, 'It's all lies . . . It's all lies . . .' Why did it sometimes seem as if my sister and I were guests of benevolent strangers? That Nenek, Ibu and Father were owners of a secret they all conspired to conceal. Shame they didn't know that a lie must never be kept in paradise. That it will wreck everything in its desire for release.

I suppose I should start my story with Father, the puppet master. A shadow maker of incomparable talent, and fingers like moving snakes. He would lower himself onto a mat set in front of a coconut oil lamp and, with a wooden hammer clutched between the toes of his right foot, strike a rhythm, tock-tock. It was the signal the orchestra waited for. A delicate sound would fill the air as he picked up a flat dead puppet from a coffin-shaped box. On the screen a lacy silhouette would tremble, then distort as he threw it in and out of focus behind the flickering flame. Then it stopped suddenly, motionless in the middle of the screen.

By the time he had recited his magic mantras and began manipulating their articulated limbs a beautiful spell had been cast and all the little puppets had come to life. Their fantastic adventures never ended before dawn. How proud we were sitting in the audience, our bellies aching with laughter, or helpless tears running down our faces. Afterwards we went to kneel before him. To bless us with magical protection he sprinkled holy water on us, and pressed damp rice grains onto our foreheads, temples and throats.

Oh Father, Father . . . how could you?

Unbeknownst to us the puppet master had fitted invisible strings to our bodies, and on the sly threw his voice into our mouths as he pulled us this way and that. It was he who first brought grief into our home.

In my mind my father remains truly handsome with long sweeping eyelashes and a high nose bridge, but also mysterious, veiled and remote. Under his thin moustache the edges of his lips rose cautiously in a polite dignified smile. In all his movements he was measured and thoughtful. Except for the huge black and yellow orchid he sometimes wore behind one ear he dressed plainly, always in black. Mild mannered, yes, but behind the mask?

'He loves you both dearly,' Ibu said to my sister and me.

But I knew a secret she didn't. My father loved only my sister. Perhaps because he had guessed that my sister required his regard more. Or more likely because with my jaw clenched I was too much like Nenek. Too fierce and too bold for his liking. I sensed the barely disguised rejection in his whole being, in the tightly drawn-up knees, the implacable curve of his narrow neck, the wincing thin-lipped smiles he turned in my direction, and in his beautiful, purposely hiding eyes. But that's not the secret. The real secret was that I didn't care. The only person I ever wanted love from was Ibu. The one thing in the world I craved was

for her eyes to descend upon me, bright and adoring. Filled with that same caressing light with which they rested upon my father. I thought her the most amazing, most beautiful and cleverest soul on earth. I wanted to be just like her. In my memory are perfectly preserved snatches of conversation where she appears brilliantly witty.

In fact, my memory serves me wrong. In reality she was a withdrawn, frail, crippled creature. Not by any standards could she be considered beautiful, but she did own two remarkable assets. One was a spectacular mane of thick, knee-length, jet-black hair that sat in a perfumed, sleek bun at the nape of her neck. The other was an unusually pale complexion. Her ghostly skin came from never having set foot outside the house on account of her easily tiring heart.

A hole-in-the-heart baby, she had lain in Nenek's lap and taken all of six hours to empty a bottle of milk. The doctors shook their heads, and warned that she would not make it past childhood. But Nenek gathered my mother to her breasts, spat on the disinfected floor, and cursed, 'What your cruel mouths have flung at me, may your children suffer.' She returned home rigid with resolution. Was she not descended from a long and illustrious line of medicine men?

Her daughter would live. There was nothing she would not dare, no sacrifice too great for the puny life she had brought into the world.

I remember well many bad nights while I was growing up, when the dark winds howled down the valley, only to turn around restlessly and like wolves dart up the mountain slopes again, wanting to take. Impatient for my mother to cease her rasping breaths. I wanted to stroke Ibu, comfort her, but I dared not. She lay on her thin mattress on the floor, a crumpled figure, too delicate to be helped.

That is how I remember Fear. A small dimly lit room dense with slowly smoking herbs and seeds. In the middle a woman's desperate fight for breath. The feral, haunted look

in my sister's eyes as we passed each other noiselessly bearing countless braziers of red coals into Ibu's living quarters. And of course the blood pounding in my wrists.

And Hope I remember as another figure, crouched beside Ibu's prone body. Oh, so powerful that her force radiated from her palms, soaked her clothes and swirled around her. I wish you could have seen Nenek then. Slowly, rhythmically, she rubbed her home-made ointments onto her daughter's chest all the while singing to the spirits, her native hill-tribe dialect begging, wheedling, and now and again threatening. She made promises of offerings and sacrifices. Quickly I became an apostle of those strange half-commanding, half-plaintive songs. With every flare of lightning that struck the drenched sky, I too implored again and again,

Do not call her name at night, not at night.
Oh Powerful spirits, I welcomed you to my home.
If I have harmed you, forgive me, be kind.
Accept my offerings, Oh powerful ones.
Do not take what is not yours.
Do not show your wrath.
Oh you, leave me the child.
Consent that she lives another day.
Do not call her name, not at night,
NOT TONIGHT.

In the face of her mother's ferocious purpose Ibu's small hennaed hands lay still, her silent enduring eyes hopeless. Then it seemed she was a beautiful, fragile child already lost to us. Sometimes the child was moved to kiss her mother's broad feet, splayed like a fan. Gently she laid her cheek on them as if they were a pillow. In truth, she was weary. Softly, breathlessly she soothed her mother, 'It is only a garment I will discard, Mother. Let my soul go.'

The reasonable words only stung Nenek into beseeching the spirits so wretchedly that they listened. From our outposts in the shadowy doorway, my sister and I sat excluded and awed by the immensity of love in that tiny room, conscious of the night outside straining for what belonged to us. Suppose we lost Ibu to the night? Suppose in a moment of weakness we lost the battle? Outside, the inexhaustible wind bayed.

By the time Father's cockerels crowed in the dawn, my sister had long since curled up against the wall in exhausted sleep and my voice was hoarse or completely lost from relentless bargaining. Only then did I know relief. Only then through the solid smoke did Nenek's eyes, savage and triumphant, swing around to meet mine, her accomplice.

Even in the dark we had cheated death of his quarry. Again. He was not strong enough, not against the combined strength of Nenek and me. We had planted another day for Ibu to hobble into. Nenek stood up, taking with her Ibu's spittoon, half a coconut shell; inside, a mix of ashes and Ibu's yellow-green phlegm. Dizzy with exhilaration I stood up and went to claim the victor's seat, the place Nenek had vacated. Softly I touched Ibu's hand and it curled weak and pale around mine. She shut her eyes and opened her mouth, perhaps to say thank you, but I forestalled her. 'Sshh,' I whispered, 'sshhh,' and all the tenderness in the world trembled upon my lips. I remember it now like it was yesterday. How warm it was. That special space vacated by Nenek. Beside Ibu. And Ibu, poor thing, she smiled sadly, bravely, and endured another daybreak.

Painfully shy and reclusive, Ibu often passed most of her days in silence, her expression rapt, as her nimble clever hands, dyed red with plant juices, effortlessly twisted a single palm leaf into a work of art fit for a God, or created pretty umbrellas from the lacy stomach of a pig. She did these things as offerings for us to carry to the shrines.

Under her charge even the humble pale yellow feathers of an immature coconut leaf aspired to be a delightful vessel, held together by its own central spine.

One year during the *Galungan*, a great Hindu celebration, Ibu made the most beautiful offering I have ever seen, a two-meter-tall tower, so skilfully constructed that not even a hint of the wooden skewers nor the supporting banana stem showed through the cluster of whole roast chickens, sweetmeats, fruits, vegetables, cakes and flowers. Nenek carried the majestic thing on her head to the temple. At the inner temple entrance she bent low enough for the men waiting on the other side to receive the soaring tower.

The other women circled my mother's magnificent creation again and again. They stared at the wild sago-palm fruit, green satin balls quilted with red silk and jungle purple pitcher flowers. I saw their eyes changing: surprise, envy and, without fail, passion for my mother's skill. How long they stood studying the technique that managed clusters of waxy pink berries with scarlet bark, or vermilion chilli peppers with the crimson bracts and yellow petals of a mangosteen bloom. But in their hearts they knew they would never reach Ibu's perfection. No one could.

We rushed home to tell her. Smiling gently she gave us permission to decorate her hair.

I will never forget that first tantalising waft of coconut oil in my nostrils and the feeling of silk, released and uncoiling in my hands. Together we set about pinning it into a large smooth shape called *susuk konde*. While we surrounded it with jewelled combs and delicate pins worked in gold, Ibu chewed dates wrapped in betel nut leaves. Afterwards she traced our eyes, noses and mouths with her callused fingers saying, 'It is a good thing that both of you were given your father's face. Eyes like shimmering morning stars. You are the most beautiful children I have ever seen.'

Then she placed bougainvilleas in our hair. She wanted us

to be famous Balinese dancers. Gently she cupped our chins in her hands drawing us so close that we smelt the scent of dates and betel nut leaves on her breath, but I pushed my face nearer still yearning for a fiercer embrace, wanting those calluses deeper in my skin, because even with her fingers inquisitive on our faces, I felt her pushing us away. As if we did not belong to her.

As a result of her frailty we were never allowed to sleep with her, so those indolent afternoons when we lay quietly beside her were precious beyond words. Thrilled by her attention we took turns begging for more stories, wanting glimpses of her childhood in the hills with Nenek. But Ibu's memory was poor or her tongue lazy. All she cared to recount was still being hungry after a meagre meal of baked rice from the night before and sitting at the door of an improvised one-room hut waiting for Nenek to come up the hill slope. And when Nenek came, it was with her neck moving from side to side like a classical Indian dancer, in an effort to balance the enormous container of water on her head.

In her right hand she carried more water in a blue pail, and in the left she held the hand of my uncle, long dead. He was a blur in my mother's memory. A thin boy who broke Nenek's heart when he died in childhood.

Once Ibu told us of the moment of his passing. 'There were brown rats running along the walls of the hospital corridor when a white-coated man came to tell Nenek her son was dead. For a moment she stood utterly still. Then she sagged to the ground, sitting awkwardly, her head crooked, her mouth slobbering, and her breath rasping like some great felled beast; in terrible agony, but unable to die. Sometimes I think she should have.'

We did not ask why. Hypnotised by Ibu's voice, we absently stroked the odd, toeless stump that she usually curled up and concealed under her sarong. It was smooth

bright pink and utterly useless. Only with the help of a walking stick could Ibu limp around. Though she thought it important that not even her good foot had sunk into the brown ooze of the rice fields her defect was not a cause for revulsion. We had not yet learned shame and we accepted things as they were, and if anything loved her all the more for her imperfection.

As a rule, when Ibu was well, she worked all day, every day on a simple loom. For though we lived in paradise we were very poor and each of us did our share to fill the rice bins; my father made his puppets talk, Nenek cured the ill and made the cakes that my sister and I sold after school, and Ibu wove luscious glorious lengths of *songket,* gold or silver thread embroideries on silk dyed in rich deep tones of indigo, ochre, turquoise, lime, black or cinnamon. Patterns so intricate and complex that they took her many months to finish. Each brought into existence to adorn the pampered curves of wealthy women. Even now it is a cause of sadness to me that not a single one was born destined to rest on my mother's body. Ibu would never wear anything but the simplest batik sarongs. 'It would be a waste to wear them in the house,' she always said.

On our tenth birthday, on two lengths of chocolate cloth, she began to make our heirlooms, pieces so exquisite that they took her two years to complete to her satisfaction. Fantastic forests of birds, animals, flowers and dancing girls. It is no lie to say they were the most beautiful things she ever made. It was another time, but if I close my eyes now, I can hear the bells on her loom tinkling as her industrious fingers worked swiftly, incessantly. It is the sound of Ibu, her work, her worth, and her beauty.

It was Nenek who carefully folded the beautiful pieces and took them to the expensive, air-conditioned boutiques in Seminyak. Now how do I describe Nenek to you? To start with she looked like nobody's grandmother. I

remember many a time when strangers mistook her for our older sister. By Balinese standards she was considered a great beauty, and whenever we were out with her, *always* on our path stood staring men, tourists, their armpits sticky with sweat, and their eyes like licking tongues, so she must have been beautiful even by your standards. But what words can I use to make the rest of her acceptable to your Western mind? For my grandmother lived in utter simplicity, but accomplished feats that will have you suspecting trickery.

In her universe all of nature was a source of spirituality. She talked to it, it talked back to her. Have you seen a tree smile? I have. When Nenek passed. She acquainted them with her business, and they shared their ancient knowledge. Sometimes they gave her roots that looked like cassava, but when the dark bark-like skin was removed the flesh was as fresh and as sweet as watermelon. Other times they spoke of special roots, which had to be dug out with one's bare hands or their magic would dissipate into the earth. Squatting, she dug deep into the ground; only the thickest roots yield the special healing oils she needed. Sometimes her fingers bled, but no matter, the patient must smile. She needed them to make Ibu's medicine.

The villagers called her *balian*, a healer specialising in curing the ill and setting broken bones, but they sensed that she was more. Much more. And while they had no proof there were whispers all the same, insinuations that Nenek was in reality a *balian uig*, a maker of spells and charms, some dangerous. They pointed to the 'male' papaya tree growing in our compound. According to an old Balinese superstition only witches needed the strangely uneven shadow of such a tree, to congregate under and to indulge in obscene blood-drinking orgies. And so the innocent tree confirmed their ugly suspicions.

Although Nenek had arrived in the village when Ibu was

only nine years old she remained a stranger but accepted she would always be one and didn't care. She carried on making her daily offerings of flowers, fruit and sweet cakes in the temples, and at crossroads, graveyards and accident sites, rotting meat, onions, ginger and alcohol. Kneeling, she chanted, '*Rang, ring, tah.*' Born, living, dead. Let them think that she was odd.

She refused even to change her dance, to be like the rest of the women in our village. I saw them watching her when she danced in the temple courtyard, a container full of glowing coals balanced on her head. They kept their expressions neutral, half-interested, but I knew they thought her vulgar.

It was her vigour that they mistook for a fault. I perceived only the amazing energy in her pagan movements. They were, after all, tribal dances. Unsmiling, she craned her neck until its veins were like cords under her skin. Then she lifted her right foot, stiffened it into a weapon, and kicking it sideways, pranced high into the air, her eyebrows in her hairline, her fierce eyes wide and staring. Her mouth screaming a slow peculiar cry. With her wrists arranged in front of her face, she began to whirl, at first with controlled grace, then more and more wildly until she was spinning so fast that her eyes were rivers of black in her face. Spiteful sparks of orange flew around her.

The other women were frightened of her.

And yet their vanity was greater, and they courted her cautiously. They wanted the beauty she brewed inside her cauldron. In her charmed hands roots and leaves turned into potent liquids called *jamu*, capable of beautifying a body and captivating youth to dance a little longer upon a woman's cheek. She and Ibu were the best advertisement for her medicine, for even after Nenek touched fifty, and Ibu thirty, youth tarried. They remained as if in their twenties, with wasp-like waists, jet-black hair and dewy

skin. They consumed so many unguents that their skin became fragrant to zigzagging dragonflies that sought camouflage on their colourful clothes.

When my sister and I reached puberty, we too were required to take a handful of the tiny black pellets Nenek rolled once a week. And once a month for two hours, she covered us from head to toe in *lulur*, a yellow paste made with ginger, turmeric, spices, oil, rice powder, and a secret blend of jungle roots. It could not be denied that my sister and I had exceptionally fine skin, finer than all the other girls in the village. It was a source of great envy, for every Balinese girl coveted beautiful skin the colour of gold. And so the women and their daughters came, smiling, their eyes carefully polite. They did this for beautiful skin the colour of gold.

But behind her back the cowards called her *Ratu Gede Mecaling*, after the legendary King of Nusa Penida, a fearful, fanged sorcerer, or simply *leyak*, witch. I even heard her referred to her as *rangda*, widow, but in fact the name is synonymous with a dreadful witch who tears children apart with her long fingernails and eats their innards.

'*Leyak geseng, teka geseng.*' Burn the witch, burn them all, their children chanted at the crossroads.

I rushed up to them and pushed the gang leader so hard he fell backwards into a ditch. My hands on my hips and breathing hard, I challenged them all to fight me. Nobody dared. I was the granddaughter of a witch. Instead they mumbled that they had seen her alone at midnight, meditating in the cemetery.

I laughed. 'I do not believe you. None of you has the nerve to go there in the first place,' I mocked.

They alleged that inside her locked cupboard was the smoked, dried corpse of my uncle, but I crossed my arms over my chest and retorted that I *had* looked, and her cupboard was completely innocent. Scornfully I advised

them not to talk of that which they did not understand.

But here's the real truth.

They were right. Their tiny insignificant hearts were right to fear my grandmother. Nenek was a witch. A powerful one. She had magic powers, inherited from her father. She could see 'far away'. Things you and I cannot. It was she who taught us about the spirits that reside in each tree, animal and oddly shaped stone. 'Be good to them,' she said, 'they confer power to the respectful.'

But her real power she derived from another source. She secretly nurtured *buta kalas*, invisible treacherous ground spirits. Creatures of harm she bought from another like her. Keeping them was very dangerous, and she had to pass them on to another witch or sorcerer before she died or, unable to cross over to the next world, she would suffer terrible tortures on her deathbed. It was an ugly horrible business, but she could not do without them. She needed them to protect Ibu. Everyone had a purpose in life and my grandmother had only one, to prolong her daughter's life. There was nothing she would not do for Ibu.

In her command was *macan tutul*, a sleek, long-bodied, panther-like creature. He did her every bidding, but required fresh blood and wild boar meat on a regular basis, and sometimes the whole corpse of a dog. She also sought the assistance of another potent spirit, pale snake, who gave her visions and taught her to heal. When first he appeared, he tested her fortitude by coiling his monstrous body around her. She stood in the middle of the immense serpent, unmoving and unafraid, until he recognised her, his new master. Forced into submission he showed her how to listen to the blood rushing inside a man's veins, to know what sickness ailed him.

One moonlit night, I awakened in the early hours of morning and, still not fully awake, thought I saw him in my peripheral vision, enormous, vaporous and resting a few

inches above the ground by Nenek's head. I swung my eyes around instantly, but the thick white coils had already returned to darkness. There was nothing left but gloom by Nenek's sleeping face.

Once I asked her, 'What if it ever came to pass that you simply cannot find another to pass your *buta kalas* to?'

She looked at me steadily, her enigmatic eyes bleak. 'I have already seen the face of my heir,' she replied finally. Her voice was alien and sad.

'Who is it?' I whispered, my heart leaping in my chest. I feared her answer.

'You are still too young to meet my successor. Think no more of it. I will not suffer. I will die in peace.' She placed a gentle hand on my forehead. 'Now, go find your sister and play in the fields.' And comforted by the cool sure hand on my skin I went. The world was so full of grown-up secrets then.

And Nenek went back to heating leaves and squeezing the green liquid on wounds and sores. Routinely she spat on her patients. Her spit was powerful. It could cure the sick. Muttering her chants she rubbed a dough ball all over a sick body to draw out the poison. Then she ripped it open and inspected the inside. If she found needles or black seeds then black magic was the source of sickness, and her black eyes would gaze at her patients warily. They left her with secretive eyes and a small square of hair shaved at the back of their heads, a puncture in the middle of it.

One day I saw Nenek, without warning, skilfully stab a man between his fingers. Shocked he tried to pull back but her grip on his hand was mighty. She held his hand over a pot, letting the blood flow into his medicine of tree sap. There was also that woman from Sumatra who came with blinding migraines that the Western doctors could do nothing about. I saw my grandmother reach up and carefully cut a vein in the woman's forehead. It was late

afternoon and a whole bowl of blood was caught before the spiteful spirit pinching a nerve in the woman's head finally consented to exit her body.

It was while sitting on a mat sharing our evening meals from a common pot with Nenek that my sister and I glimpsed her secret special world. One that you would never believe. One where night wanderer spirits disguise themselves as black cats, naked women and shiny black crows. Invisible they travel in straight lines, gathering at crossroads, spots of great magic and importance, causing accidents and harm. Sometimes they tarried by the pigpen and Nenek caught and released them into trees and stones.

I was right. Your eyebrows have risen by the smallest fraction. You do not believe me. You think it is hocus-pocus. But remember this, you have your science, and we have our magic. Only when you look into my grandmother's eyes will you know what I say to be true, will you name her remarkable.

For my grandmother sees out of eyes that are indescribable, at once tantalising and terrifying. They are coal black, bottomless and, in flickering lamplight, nearly inhuman. Inside her eyes you begin to understand why the Dutch stopped importing Balinese slaves in favour of more docile captives. It was ferocious women like her who wounded themselves with daggers and, dipping their fingertips in their wounds, painted their foreheads red before they fell into the flames that carried them and their dead husbands to the underworld.

And yet I remember Nenek best as a liquid shadow, moving silently in the gloom of early morning, her gold bracelets glinting. It was her habit to awaken at four in the morning, just as the windows of the rice farmers were beginning to yellow with the light of oil lamps. Softly she entered Ibu's room, and stood silently over her daughter. Satisfied with the gently breathing vision she went out to

awaken her songbirds and begin her day. In Bali the sky lightens early. By five in the morning the sun is already in the sky.

She swept the courtyard clean of the lemon-white frangipani fallen overnight before hoisting a round bamboo basket onto her back, and setting off unarmed up the bodies of mountains. She was their child. She honoured them and they blessed her. Their jungles of laughing monkeys, beautiful butterflies and screaming birds were her medicine garden.

When we returned from selling cakes we found Nenek sitting at the doorway, eating wild quinces and flossing the coarse fibres caught in her teeth with strands of her own hair, or fanning herself with a woven palm leaf, lamenting for the cool mountain winds. She was descended from those remote tribes that lived in the blue-grey mountains. That much was clear, but the rest was a mystery. There was an abandoned husband and a dead child somewhere, but everything else was not for telling. Her secrets were many and could not be readily divulged. A loss of power or, worse, insanity awaited the loose mouth. Terrible secrets may only be revealed to lizards.

For they are special animals. Nenek said that they understood our language, but had been forbidden to speak of anything but the future. Even then they could not be completely trusted. At certain times of the year Nenek caught them in her bare hands and carefully sewed their mouths shut before whispering her secrets to them. It saddened me to see them scuttling away, their mouth sewn shut for ever. I remember the disloyal thought that she should keep her secrets to herself if they were so intolerable that a lizard must starve to death to protect them.

Still, I loved her deeply and recognised her and not my father as the head and protector of our family. Many a

night during the hot seasons when we slept outdoors, my sister and I curled up to her warm body like puppies on the *bale*, platform. And though it was clear that she loved us much less than she did Ibu, she was the most extraordinary figure of my childhood. She took us to do amazing things, like going in search of the rarest flower in the world. Its tiny bud grows for nine months to bloom fleetingly, for four days.

We had to trek all the way up to Sumatra to find it. At the end of our exhausting journey, deep in a rainforest surrounded by the unfamiliar, we stood and stared at the strange flower. Deep red and dotted with velvet yellow warts; it emerged alien and enormous (four feet across), from between the roots of wild vines and the decaying litter on the forest floor. It was immediately apparent why it was called the corpse flower. It stank like a dreadfully rotting corpse. Carrion flies buzzed around it. But once dried and pulverised only a few motes of its dust were required to shrink a womb stretched by pregnancy or restore the sexual potency of an ageing man.

Often Nenek took us to the seaside, to rocky outreaches where tourists do not go. Squatting on the edges of rocks she used a hook to prise away sea urchins hanging on to their submerged undersides. We ran around in the salt spray helping her gather seaweed. On our way back we stopped by the poor village of the fish eaters to buy salt fish. We picked out the fish we wanted from the many carpets of dried fish and from a rattan basket Nenek selected the freshest fish in all of Bali.

With the crimson sun taken by the hills, Nenek began to grill the seafood over coconut husks. Ibu brought out plates of boiled sweet potatoes and the juicy bamboo shoots marinating in vinegar and chillies. We sat in a circle at the doorway of my mother's living quarters, eating fried soybean cake while the bats left the trees to look for food.