

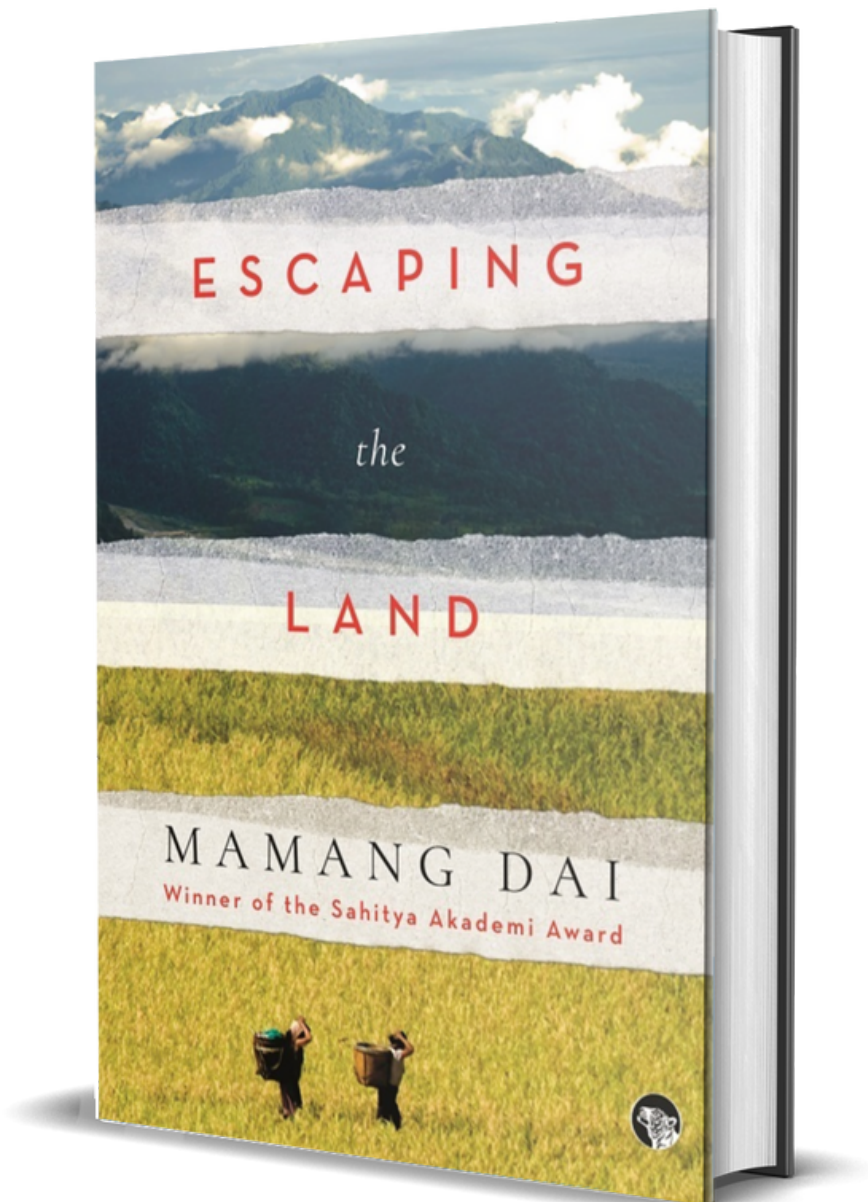


# Escaping The Land

by

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An exclusive extract from  
the JCB Prize for Literature



CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY  
INDIAN WRITERS

Book One

TIME

## *The house of calendars*

The house stood on a hill covered with bamboo thickets. It was raised on concrete pillars twelve feet above the ground and looked slightly askew, as if ferocious winds had buffeted it. The old wooden boards slanted to the left, though looking up from the sloping path to the house, the pointed dome of the hill behind the house and the triangular ridging of the roof appeared to be joined in a perfect line. More hills loomed behind.

An old cane sofa, a table and a couple of stools were placed haphazardly on the veranda. No one seemed to be about. The front door was wide open. I walked in. Bright sunlight spilled in through thin cotton curtains and the emptiness inside the house gave it an air of a transit camp. I knew this was the old part of the house. I had been here before but this visit was coming after a gap of many years. I noticed a new extension that jutted out on a slope overlooking a clump of trees surrounded by rice fields.

'Hello, hello!' I called out, not worried by the absence of people because I knew someone would come round by and by. I peered out of the window. A path below to the right led to a lake and a zoo, and the road on the left was the national highway that skirted a big hotel and turned in towards the city of Itanagar. From this intersection another road

ran straight through the mountains to Gohpur town in Assam.

A pile of books was stacked in one corner and the wooden boards of this room were tacked with calendars in horizontal layers of bright colours. There were pictures of flowers, lakes, gushing waterfalls, gods and goddesses, the sacred heart of Jesus, lilies, Japanese art, sea birds, snowflakes, everything; and they came with the printed names of shops, agencies, student unions, arms dealers, cement mixers and a host of other companies who had taken the trouble to print out these pictures for all the years that had come and gone. A number of dates were circled in green ink. Perhaps they were important dates. What had been so important, I wondered. Where had the owner of the house come by this great collection?

‘Ah, everywhere I went, every time I bought something in every small town, I was given a calendar. I don’t know why,’ said the owner of the house. He was an elderly man in his mid-fifties who had come in from working outside somewhere in the big compound. ‘I thought I would put them up like this,’ he said. ‘Pity to throw them away. Anyway, they brighten up the place, don’t you think?’

‘Yes, but what are these dates—all circled?’

‘Well, they are just marks. March—May—summer—winter—a reminder of time for an aging politician, that’s all. Tell me, how are you?’

‘I am working on a project. That’s what I came to tell you.’

‘You look happy,’ he said.

I was feeling happy. I was starting work on something that interested me, and it felt good to be sitting drinking tea on the veranda. ‘I wanted to ask you some questions,’ I said.

‘Oh, like what kind of questions?’

‘Questions about you, politics...your life...’

‘Hmm...What is there to tell? You can ask anyone here about me and they will tell you more than I would ever be able to! What *don’t* people know about politicians?’

This was true. No one was better known than Lutor, the veteran politician with his long and successful career in politics since the formation of the state. Children shouted his name and women’s faces broke into smiles when he entered a village. Men spoke of him with evident camaraderie and he was welcomed wherever he went.

‘I have some good friends, that is all,’ he said, sipping tea in between answering my questions about his political career. He laughed when I pointed out that everyone spoke about him as if he had extraordinary powers to predict the future. Yes, he knew about that but he disputed that he had any powers. ‘Look at me,’ he said, ‘do you think I look any different from the man next door?’

No, he looked like any one of my uncles with a familiar, dependable face, but I didn’t say anything. I had an idea of Lutor’s reticence and I knew this was his way of making conversation to deflect interest away from himself. Nothing about him gave any sign of his extraordinary influence on the lives of men and women in the villages. But I knew something of his past and I shared an association with some of the characters in a story from long ago when everything had been different and full of possibilities.

That evening, I opened the windows of my small study and stared out at the hills. Everything was still. I looked around the room. There was the table. The lamp. The pen. I rummaged through a pile of papers until I found an old journal marked ‘NEFA NOTEBOOK.’ Other than a few

entries in a clear, slanting hand there was little else in the book except a photo of a young man sitting on a stone with one arm resting on his knee as if posing for some artistic effect. In the background was a bamboo hut, slightly out of focus. I began flicking through the pages. A piece of paper fell out. I picked it up carefully, knowing what it was. It was a blank sheet folded in two that held a piece of pressed fern. I stared at it. How old was this piece of memorabilia? It was almost withered away, but here it was—these things that had been nudging at me all these years to look again at this green life offering food, shelter, medicine; and explore the secrets of their buried, invisible roots.

Now the brown memento was so old and stiff it was ready to fall apart if I touched it too much. It could go into the fire and that would be that. The lives of people in every village and district had changed since the time this piece of fern had been so carefully pressed in between the thin pages of a book. There were new roads and new towns growing faster than anyone could have imagined. Yet the land remained the same. Nothing could change the outline of the hills. In the dry winter months, the jungle could be pushed back but the next summer would always see the return of wild creepers flaunting their monstrous beauty and clinging to the swooning trees. No work force with hundreds of men and machinery and giant excavators could dig away the trees and rocks and fling the insidious vine into a permanent death. I held the photo and continued to gaze out. I could feel the chill settling on my shoulders. Something was tugging at my heart. I hit the light switch and the small lamp made a yellow pool of light on the table. I thought about Lutor and the things he had said about the mountains and how they were always there, rearing

up over our lives. But now I sensed something else. A lake was hidden somewhere and a small wave was curling and lifting, as if to peel back the surface, beginning with a corner, there—along the quiet edge of water. Was it true what Lutor had said, that everyone was born with an original obsession? From what age did anyone begin to realise this? Was it from the time a person could dream?

No, Lutor had said. It was after the first setback, or even very late, maybe after several setbacks. It was the time when you realised life can fool you and you have to fight back. Then you find out which way your heart lies and after some time, suddenly, the rules of the game are trespassed. The common guidelines no longer apply. Instinct takes over and we act according to our memory of the original obsession.

## *The original obsession*

The original obsession was a dream of a knife blade. Everything that happened began from there, from the time when there was a war and the world changed, and a knife began to cut through the canvas, sometimes with serrated edges, sometimes covering the distance between two points in a single stroke. But most of the time it was a slow gnawing, with blunt edges.

Once, a man dreamed he dived into the river and saw, resting on the sand, a gleaming knife. Lomey carried it up firmly gripped between his teeth. Shortly afterwards he was blessed with a son. Ignoring his wife's pleas, he did not stay home to celebrate this birth. Instead, he joined a band of warriors who were already setting out to avenge the murder of a great chief of the area. He was among the chosen, known for his courage and daring. His friends were waiting for him.

In October 1953, a party of 165 men accompanied by an armed platoon of Assam Rifles had been attacked in a small village called Aching mori in the remote valley of the Subansiri river somewhere deep in the mountains beyond Assam. Forty-seven people including the commandant and twenty-seven Assam Rifle jawans had been killed. They were men sent by the government to survey the area beyond



the established post of a place called Along. The band of warriors did not attach importance to this. Their mission was to avenge the murder of the chief who had accompanied the ill-fated column as Head Interpreter. In the wilderness beyond their own village, he had been captured by unknown tribesmen and brutally tortured before he was killed. The men wanted a name. Who had killed their chief? It had taken them several months of secret meetings and investigations to gather information from other villagers about what had happened. And now they thought they had something. They were restless and eager to set out before anyone got wind of their intentions. The route was uncertain and they would be stalking a dangerous prey.

They marched into forests dripping with perpetual rain. An icy wind made them crouch against one another. The men stopped all speech and began to move like animals breathing without a sound, their eyes restless and their bodies alert for sudden attack. It was fight, or die. They knew they could not turn back now. The serrated leaves of wild cane swayed soundlessly as they passed by with faces set like imperturbable masks. Sometimes, ferns with lips and eyes caressed them. Then Lomey, the father of the newborn child, remembered his son like a searing flash and smiled at the small patches of sunlight that floated like magic pools before them in that fearful forest.

One morning, they crawled up a steep hill of mud and decay and saw below them the sleeping village. It huddled in the stillness like ancient stones rolled together, and Lomey felt his heart exploding.

‘Remember, we want only one...’ His friend Dinu whispered in his ear.

Lomey felt mockery rising up like a black wave. It would

be impossible, he knew that. They would be fighting in close combat, eye to eye, teeth to teeth. He remembered his dream of a knife blade.

In the subsequent slaughter the village was razed. Its inhabitants fled screaming into the jungle. Lomey himself did not know whether he was still breathing or whether all that was happening around him—the screaming men and women, the contortion of bodies and the death cries of rage and vengeance—was another dream. When the fighting began all his movements obeyed another instinct. His hands moved with exquisite speed and accuracy, his mind became a flame of blazing ferocity. He cut a man on the shoulder. As he fell clutching his arm, Lomey brought his sword down in a full arcing stroke on the fallen man's head.

When Dinu shouted that they had the man they wanted he suddenly remembered where he was, and wiping his sword hastily on the man he had struck down he rushed forward to join the others.

'We are not cowards. We have come all this way and we have achieved our goal,' he thought.

What followed was another dream. Their village was a distance of eight days. The element of surprise was gone and men of the enemy village would be stalking them now. They would have to double their speed and hack their way through a new trail to confuse them. The man they had taken prisoner spat on the food they gave him. He wanted to die. They wanted him alive. Only in the village could the true and final act of revenge be enacted. The entire village must witness his slow death. Only then would the spirit of the dead elder be truly avenged. The captive stared back at them with narrow, glittering eyes. He showed no fear. He uttered not a word. But on the fifth night he cried out loudly

and they could not stop him. When Dinu hit him on the head he snapped around sharply and tried to bite him. Then he continued his piercing cry opening his mouth wider and wider like a mad beast. The terrible sound echoed around the forest. The men watched him with hate and mounting desperation. He was a mighty foe. They understood that if they untied his hands he would tear open his chest and show them his heart beating with equal rage and derision.

When they reached their village, they found soldiers with guns waiting for them. The new government would not permit tribal feuds and the soldiers had come with orders to seize the captive and the men who had captured him. It was the order of the new sarkari. The whole village fell silent. There would be no punishment. The new sarkari niyom, rules, would now look after everything.

‘Our time is over,’ Lomey told his wife that night. Runners were carrying the news of their unimaginable triumph to distant villages. He himself had put his thumbprint on a number of sheets dotted with black, unknown lines. In the administrative post of Along, the officer he had faced when declaring his name and clan had looked at him with a mixture of fear and loathing.

‘We have put the seal on our fate. It is out of our hands,’ Dinu said. Dinu had accompanied the warriors because his friend Kitem had also been killed in Aching mori.

Both Dinu and Lomey were political interpreters. Their job was to liaise between the officers and the tribesmen. They were men appointed on the basis of their standing and influence in their community to translate the meaning of ‘sarkari’. They spoke a mixture of dialect, Hindi and Assamese. Sometimes it happened that another interpreter was needed to interpret the interpreters. Nevertheless, they

were the pioneers who travelled to hundreds of villages to negotiate among warring tribes and organise meetings to pave the way for settled administration. But now, times were changing. The traditional institutions of village headmen and tribal interpreters was being overtaken by a new administration and Dinu and his household were already preparing to leave Along and return to their hometown of Pasighat.

‘Yes,’ Lomey thought. ‘My thumbprint that is like no other man’s on earth is being carried away on a sheet of paper. The new sarkari has reached us. Others will decide what will happen now.’ He heard his child wailing. He had named him Lutor. His wife’s footsteps shook the bamboo as she moved about the house. Lomey listened. ‘I will be reborn in my son,’ he said to himself.

The new government was a group of officers struggling to draw a cohesive map of the country’s frontiers in post-Independence India. They were handpicked men, drawn from the army and from All India Service cadres, eager to travel and face any challenge, but here in the remote frontier they were discovering that the mountainous land stretching northwards from Assam to the Tibetan plateau was a blank of unexplored territory. In the hill town of Shillong, the administrative capital, news of this murder and vengeance in the hills caused pandemonium among the new officers recruited to handle the administration of this frontier.

Where is this place? they asked.

The name Aching mori was on everyone’s lips. Big books and maps were consulted. In British India records the early history of the region was a perplexing series of revisions, notifications and Acts that generally emerged out of punitive expeditions following a killing or a skirmish

when strangers entered tribal territory, or when tribes made raiding forays into the Assam plains. When the British discovered tea and oil in the Brahmaputra valley they drew a line under the provisions of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, to protect their commercial interests and establish the limits of British territory. This was notified as the Inner Line. Transferred on the ground this line was littered with references to hundreds of starting points, numbered masonry pillars, patrol paths, junctions, towns, rivers and confluences. British subjects were prohibited from going beyond this Inner Line without a pass into the Hills area demarcated as the North East Frontier Tracts of Assam.

Some of the officers thought the Aching mori incident had happened in the Abor hills.

Where?

Don't you remember the Abor war?

The Komsing case?

This was a reference to the single, well-known Komsing case of 1911 when a British political officer had crossed the Inner Line on a survey mission into the Abor hills. His name was Noel Williamson. He had explored Abor country before but this time he wanted to travel further upstream along the Siang River and he was carrying gifts for the villagers. He was accompanied by a colleague, Dr. Gregorson, a tea garden doctor, and everything would have gone well if not for the meeting with some tribesman along the way. There was an altercation, the outcome of which was that Dr. Gregorson was killed in a camp where he had stayed behind, while Williamson and his party of men were attacked and killed in the village of Komsing. This had resulted in the punitive Abor Expedition of 1911 when

British troops marched into the Siang valley. The Abor had been defeated and forced to sue for peace with the surrender of thousands of war arrows, war kits and swords along with the return of any property belonging to Williamson and Dr. Gregorson. A permanent post with an assistant political officer was established in a place called Pasighat on the banks of the river Siang, setting in motion a series of policy revisions vis-à-vis the tribes of the frontier, and opening the doors to exploration of the region. The Government of India also seized this opportunity to send survey missions into the hills to propose a suitable frontier line between India and Tibet. In 1914, the Hills area was renamed as the Frontier Tracts. The same year, a delegation led by Sir Henry McMahon of the India government was negotiating the Simla Accord to demarcate the country's northern boundary, by which the Frontier Tracts were effectively wedged in between the Inner and the Outer Line on the crest of the Himalayas.

Did it happen there again, in the Abor hills?

No, no, this is way beyond.

Where?

We'll soon find out.

The new Republic could not have known then that there would be still more murders, deaths of government agents and soldiers, and the accounts of terrified survivors bringing their reports before a stunned circle of officers labouring to shape the wilderness into a comprehensive administrative map. History was being written in slow, laborious stages wavering between friendship and enmity, fear and trust; and just as the Komsing incident of 1911 resulted in so many changes in the region, similarly, in 1953, the Aching mori incident was to have far-reaching and enduring repercussions.

One of the decisions taken by the government then was to rename the Frontier Tracts. Following the Aching mori case, in January 1954, the remaining tracts were demarcated as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). The 'agency' meant that the NEFA would be administered by the president through the governor of Assam as his agent, under the general supervision and control of the Ministry of External Affairs. The tracts were divided into frontier divisions and simultaneously a new administrative cadre called the Indian Frontier Administrative Service was created with recruits for this cadre to be drawn from the All India Services, and other service cadres of Assam.



This piece of news gave hope to a shy, young man who was then studying in Shillong. His name was Lipun, and he was twenty-four years old. It was his photograph that lay on my desk. My mother used to talk about him. He was the mysterious grand uncle who had been raised by one of my mother's paternal aunts after his parents died when he was a young boy. Most of the time the only thing I had heard said about Lipun was that he was somewhere, far away. By sheer dint of hard work Lipun had won a government stipend and he was one among the first batch of tribal men favoured to move out of the NEFA and complete their studies in Shillong. They lived in a building called the NEFA hostel which was a large private bungalow taken on rent by the NEFA administration's Department of Education. They received a stipend of sixty rupees of which fifty-five went into Mess charges. The news of the Aching mori incident filled them with fear and consternation. It also gave rise to some heated discussion.

‘What got into those people. Why do such a thing?’ said Darin, a fellow student. ‘Now the government will react and we are all going to suffer.’

‘Who are these people?’ Lipun asked.

‘I heard it happened up in Tagin country, in the Subansiri area.’

Where was that? Lipun realised how little he knew of the mountains and valleys beyond his hometown. Darin and he were from Pasighat. At the time towns like Pasighat and Along in the Abor Hills were the comparatively better-known parts of NEFA by their proximity to the big towns of Assam along the Brahmaputra river. There were tribes living in the next valley but they did not communicate with each other, thought Lipun. In school they were instructed in the Assamese language and Lipun knew his teachers who came from Assam, but about his own land and people he had little or no knowledge at all.

It was the same with the officers who were outraged, more so because no one had a clue about this region and the people who had perpetrated the crime. The Abor and Mishmi Hills carved out from the old Sadiya Frontier Tract were by now somewhat familiar territory, but this was only a small part of a vast land that lay like a brooding, sleeping giant. A lone Dakota aircraft was despatched to conduct an aerial survey of the spot. There was even some talk of bombing the place and setting the jungle alight to burn out the villagers just like the British had done in the Abor war of 1911.

‘The government must take action. The tribes do not understand goodwill and kindness. They are ungovernable and they deserve to be punished!’ This was the thinking among some of the officers regarding the Aching mori case.



Lipun felt his heart wince at the harsh words. Perhaps the people of Aching mori had been afraid. There had been no one to explain anything to them. As far as Lipun was aware everyone who had come into their land had come as strangers.

‘We will send soldiers,’ Lipun heard the officers saying. Others were saying they must establish contact with the tribesmen. ‘We don’t want to send out punitive expeditions like the British. What if we handle it like this—we’ll send out columns of men with officers and try to surround the area.’

He knew they were spreading out charts and confabulating at great length. The name of that little village far away in the hills began to sound like a war zone. Perhaps I could be of some help, he wondered to himself. He felt caught between a feeling of great humiliation and a pitying love for his homeland. It was so unknown. There was nothing there, only row upon row of mountains, all those ranges covered with the densest, greenest forest one could ever imagine. Where were the people? He marvelled at the tenacity of all those small villages clinging to the mountain as if the mountain and the poor huts sloping down in close, tightly packed rows were bound together forever.

It was with these mixed feelings that Lipun entered the office of a senior officer who summoned him one day and said, ‘Well, how about it?’

How about what? He stood stiffly trying not to look at the stern but handsome man who was signing some papers. They were papers concerning an appointment and first posting for Lipun.

‘How about going to Along?’

He struggled with an image of thatch houses in a small place lost in the enormous jungle. Along was the place that

had been selected by the government as base camp for their troops to march up into the village of Aching mori. He was being sent as a junior government official with a starting salary of one hundred and seventy-five rupees a month plus thirteen rupees ration money.

‘How about it?’

Yes, how about it? Why not? Perhaps he could be of help. Perhaps he could travel up into the Tagin area too. If those villagers saw him as a fellow tribesman, they might welcome him and they could talk about a lot of things. All this was to prove wrong but Lipun could not know about this then. Time had its method. Everything happened in stages and the land was the wide canvas over which the days and months rolled without a warning signal or a murmur, just as he marched into the wilderness, crossing rivers and hundreds of miles to reach the town of Dibrugarh where his bedding, camp equipment and his tin trunk were roughly loaded on to a Dakota aircraft that carried him straight to the small landing strip in Along.



In different circumstances, Lipun’s arrival would have been greeted with some fanfare. He was, after all, one of the first local men representing the government, doing sarkari work. There was Dinu whom he knew from Pasighat, but there was little time to sit together and talk. As it was, Lipun took up his duties quietly even as the town was being turned topsy-turvy with the arrival of a host of strangers and the visit of the advisor to the governor of Assam. The Aching mori incident was uppermost in everyone’s minds and in a pincer drive, columns of soldiers surrounded the ill-fated

village and captured seven men who were said to be the culprits of the 1953 attack.

One cause for happiness in this confusing time was the birth of Dinu's daughter. She arrived squirming and wailing one November dawn. The house was empty as if everyone had retreated into a glum silence with the arrival of more officers and more soldiers. Everyone was talking about new names for the area, new divisions and new rules that were being imposed on them. Both Dinu and Lomey were caught up in this whirlwind and there was very little time for family matters.

'Quick, we must give a name to this poor child,' said Gagil. She was Dinu's sister and she was the only one attending the birth in the small, empty house. Her eyes brimmed over with tears as she looked at the angry red face of the infant. The wind was roaring down the gorge and rattling the rusty tin roof and making the doors creak and whine as if they were mourning something. She heard footsteps. It was a young boy bringing a message from Dinu saying that he and his party would be unable to reach the town before nightfall. Then the old midwife looked around her and said, 'Listen to that wind! We can't wait for them. Otherwise the wind might claim the baby. Hurry, think of something. Call her O-me, meaning daughter, or why not Mukseng, mist and cloud, since it's so cold!'

'No, no, none of the old names,' the exhausted mother had waved her hand.

'Why, if you want something new give the little one an aying name!' cried the midwife. 'Why not call her N-E-PH-A or something, whatever it is that everyone is talking about now?'

No one said anything then and that was how Dinu's

daughter was named Nefa-Ome, daughter of NEFA, shortened to plain Nefa, just as many young men and women were named after the incidents and changes that were taking place when they were born, like Mac (McMahon line), Gandhi, Assam, Bharat, and Stilwell, after General Joseph Stilwell of the famous Stilwell Road of World War II vintage.



When Lutor was five years old, his father died. Soon after, Lutor's mother attached great importance to a dream of a serpent that she saw visiting the house. Early one morning she unlocked the door of the granary and gasped when she saw a deep hollow in the largest mound of rice. Now she understood her dream. Stepping back slowly she whispered, 'If you are hungry we will give you food. Do not bring harm to our family.'

It was the season of heavy rains. The earth was churned to slush and no one ventured out, not even to work in the fields. One dark evening Lutor came upon a flying fox staring at him from its perch on the wooden rafter in a corner of the hut. In the faint light filtering in through the open door behind him there was the dark creature, rain-wet and alive, watching him. Lutor held his breath. He could not utter a sound. The room became an enclosure that hummed with the sound of water. He saw the big leaves breaking. The canopy of forest crashed down and he inhaled the wind heavy with the odour of crushed fern and wild chestnut. The liquid eyes of the animal shone like gold and Lutor stood transfixed.

Later, much later, the family would wonder how and

when the creature had come in. The old people who had been sitting on the veranda all day had seen nothing. Perhaps it was the ghost of a relative. Perhaps it was another dream. Whatever it was, when it had happened there had been no time for thought. Lutor's uncle had rushed in shouting loudly and struck the creature with a heavy pole. The furry animal fell to the floor without a sound and did not move again. Lutor shuddered. He had seen the look of the falling animal. It seemed to smile at him with great tenderness as if to say:

‘It is alright. Do not be afraid. I have seen you.’

After the visitation, as his mother used to call it, Lutor remembered that he had fallen very ill. The medical officer pronounced a case of severe malaria but no one believed him. The health centre was a ramshackle hut of bamboo and diagnosis was often arbitrary, simply going by external symptoms that in Lutor's case was a fever that seemed to be burning up his body. He did not have a single shivering fit that everyone knew was a symptom of malaria. His mother kept him at home and gave him black tea mixed with a little opium. Lutor lay inert and fell into a coma for three days. He woke only when his mother tied a piece of ginger on a black thread around his neck. Lying still with his eyes closed he remembered a dream as if someone had been trying to speak to him.

He saw a boy perched on a rock skimming stones on the river. The expert twist of his wrist flung the stones making them escape, leaping over the water into the distance beyond his vision. The widening ripples fascinated him. He stared at the water and crouched, dreaming all afternoon while the sun circled the trees and dazzled the water. His back burned. He glanced quickly around him and then jumped

in casually, feet first, hitting the water with a loud splash. Turning, somersaulting underwater, he opened his eyes and saw the current rushing past him while he held his breath, staring and staring until he could hear his heartbeat beating in his head above the sound of the rushing current and he had to surface at last, gasping for air. Resting his arms on the rock he tried to peer again into the swift water. He always imagined a shining knife lying on the river bed. He knew about his father's dream of a knife blade. At first it had frightened him, but now, as a young man, it fascinated him and he wanted to transfer that dream into the moment and unravel its symbols. In a wondrous glide he would dive in deep and pick it up with his teeth. Then he would rise up and wade out of the river with the blade clenched between his teeth just like the legendary warrior whom everyone had known and admired. He watched as a bird skimmed the water then rose high into the sky. He sat still and waited. All alone he watched the bird's silent dive, swoop, swirl, and then the swift disappearance. Instinct! The only way to live life was by instinct. The bird's longing stayed in his soul. He clenched the knife blade and all the burning, hushed afternoons were lodged forever in his soul like a first encounter with himself.