2019 Shortlist

This is the house my father built

by

Sulaxana Hippisley

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1984, Badulla, the central provinces, Sri Lanka

The first house is squat and defiant in my dreams, begging to be conjured up again. Unlike the others, it has no voice and only speaks in fragments. White washed walls, terracotta tiles and a trellis above the door. We stand beneath it, you, Ammi and I. Ammi is wearing her nylon dress with the smocking at the waist. A plait snakes over her right shoulder and a reluctant smile plays on her lips. She is thirty-eight or thirty-nine, no older than I am now. There I am with a hand tucked in yours, all curly hair and pinafore gladness, four years old and counting the days to start school. Standing beside me, you are still striking enough to be called handsome at forty five: black bell bottoms, a crisp white shirt and oiled hair coiffed to waves. Bougainvillea droops from above and pots of Dahlias congregate by our feet. These are the fruits of Ammi's hands, seeds sown and watered by tears for those she has left behind in Kandy. For you. There are things you can't see, the mid-morning sun casting a lattice across your shoulder, the well that collects rainwater by the door and long afternoons when Ammi says nothing. This is the only house I know and I believe this place to be mine. No one has told me any different. Not even you.

Each morning, I demand a ride on your bike before you disappear up the hill to the police station. I am decked in the best attire I can find, white ankle socks, red sandals and a satchel you brought from Colombo that now contains two broken crayons and a lollipop wrapper. Being the chief clerk, they all like you, the sergeants, the peons and the unionists that keep you late with a glass in your hand. These people, Ammi says looking out of the window, burn bottles of her

blood. I don't ask her what this means. You perch me on the seat and we circle the road as sprays of gravel scatter across the paddy fields nearby. Ammi stands at the door, fingers gripping the frame, muttering of trucks, juggernauts and motorbikes coming over the hill and splattering our entrails across the road. But nothing comes. In fact, days pass when we see nothing on that road except a lone bottle collector or the dhobi, a bone thin man with a bulbous sack slung over his shoulder. Sometimes, when I refuse the last two balls of rice on my plate at lunch, Ammi whispers in my ear that the lumps protruding from dhobi's sack are not soiled clothes but children.

I live by the bell on your bike. It won't come again until long after dusk when the darkness, thick with crickets, spreads over the paddy fields and temple-goers pass by like apparitions in their cotton whites. A set of stone steps curves around the side towards the forest that runs below. Here is the annexe where Shanni and her parents live. Shanni is five and has a collection of clay pots in bright blue, yellow and green that I covet. Ammi tells me that they are from the great temple in Katharagama and that we'll go there one day when you get your leave. On long hot days, Shanni and I squat in the yard before the house. We balance the pots on two rocks and fill them with rice grains, water and lime leaves squished between our fingers.

Shanni's mother doesn't look much like mine. She wears a nose ring in her right nostril and short dresses that graze her knees. I can still hear the croak of her voice calling 'Akka!' through the kitchen door at Ammi. Then their giddy laughter echoes against the walls and travels high up to the sky above the stove. It's a

sound that I never hear when Ammi is with you. By midday, Ammi puts an aluminium tub of water to heat under the sun. Later, she sits me in it and pours a lukewarm jug over my skin. For a moment, the water is as tender as fingers tickling a newborn's back. Then she tutts, yanks a limb and scrubs away the sand and grit that has gathered between my toes and fingers. Birds circle overhead, hawks, eagles and other scavengers from the jungle nearby in search of a carcass or two.

In the afternoon, I sit at Ammi's feet with one of your old office ledgers and draw chubby maidens over columns of dates and figures. The floor is a cool magenta under my feet and just beneath the dining table is a spot that has turned fuchsia after a bottle of Ammi's Cutex slipped from my hands. Ammi likes this hour. I can tell. Beyond the open road, the long paddy quivers in the heat. Everything slumbers, caught under its quiet lull. She lays the newspaper on the floor and leans with chin over knees to turn each page. Sometimes she reads old *Filmfare* magazines and points at a double spread of Meena Kumari or Vyjanthi Mala. Their kohl lined eyes stare dreamily into a distance space that only Ammi can follow. But pride of place belongs to a serene faced Nutan who Ammi has framed and put on top your radio. Soon, the sky begins to turn pink through the acacia trees. House martins twitter noisily among the eaves. Evening pujas begin and mothers berate their children to come indoors. This is the hour when it all begins to change and I stare through the grills in the window, wishing for the sound of your bell. This is the hour when I follow Ammi around the house, gripping the edge of her dress as she turns the screw on each Petromax lamp until the flame dances high and wide. One sits on the side-table in the living

room but shadows loom large from places unknowable to me during the day. Armchair legs become dark fortresses and decorative pots grow tusks and trunks that curve along the walls. Sometimes, Ammi tells me the story of her cousin whose entire face and body were set alight when she fell asleep studying next to a Petromax. For months afterwards, when they used to visit, she lay silent under layers of banana leaves and woven baskets to ward off the flies from her wounds.

Sometime during the night, I hear a hum. Voices thin the darkness like mosquitoes.
'Like a jungle, like a jungle…how can you know what it's like to be alone here with a child?'
'Where do you want to go? Back to Kandy? You call that place home with your family?'
The next day, when I wake, you've already left for work, forgetting my daily ride on your bike.

After that, you bring home a series of birds. One day, you come home with a large cage containing a wild eagle, rescued from a raid on an illegal poacher. I remember the talons, sore and red, gripping the bar in its cage, and its skull, hairless from mistreatment. Tortured to keep quiet, its vast silence fills the cage. All day long, his unblinking eyes dart across the bars. You hang the cage on a pole and lower it into the empty well. Afterwards, you ask me to stay indoors as you drop dead mice into its beak. People come to watch your exploits, the shopkeeper on the upper road who calls you 'Police sir', Shanni's father, and

various neighbours. Then another day, you bring home a cockatoo, a mournful thing, incongruous with its dazzling tufts shorn to grey in places. All the birds are guests, merely taking a sojourn on their way to the zoo, stopping briefly just to see me. This is the story you tell.

One night, you don't come home at all. Ammi and I watch from the door as police jeeps roll down the hill one after the other; their lights are on full beam as the place bends beneath the silence of a curfew. Gone are the temple goers and the leisurely whistles of village boys walking home from their evening swim in the river. Ammi toasts bread on a griddle and I take time to chew the burnt edge, savouring the queer taste of the metal pan on my tongue. She watches from the window afterwards and we don't speak of you or wonder where you might be. Later that night comes a knock on the door and I hear Shanni's mother, her girlish squawk reduced to an urgent whisper.

You come home the next day by foot and a strange smell hangs in the air, like burnt feathers or palm leaves set alight. You sit in the wicker chair by the front door and sip black tea blankly. Ammi tells you that Shanni's mother brought her wedding jewels, wrapped in an old sari to give to her for safe keeping before they ran to hide in the forest. After that, I don't see Shanni or her mother again.

At the end of the month, we leave Badulla. On moving day, I stand in the yard as you carry the beams from our beds and load them onto the back of a rickety lorry bound for Kandy. They look like the limbs of a sleeping giant who has been hiding amongst us all along. It seems strange to me, the house, with all our

furniture now gone and just shadows and marks on the walls where pictures and chairs once stood. I am sorry for the house, sorry that it will be all alone without us. Then it strikes me that it was never ours to begin with. For the last reprieve, Ammi shows me a secret, a door concealed by a cupboard which leads via a few steps down to Shanni's kitchen. She lets me walk down a step at a time and we both stand there, looking at the pot on the stove with a wooden spoon still perched across its rim as though Shanni and her mother might return any minute to stir it again.

1986, Muruthalawa, Kandy

Some houses are like people, I discover. They have names and moods and expectations that cannot be fulfilled. Our new house in Kandy is a bungalow named 'Samantha.' It is printed clearly on letters that arrive and all the local people know it by name. Samantha is a long sprawling vessel with three bedrooms, two dining rooms, high ceilings and panels with wrought iron lotuses that flank the front door on either side. It has the air of an ageing matron, reclining in eau-de cologne scented crinolines and whispering of glory days gone by. A driveway slopes down to the front lawn, bordered by neat bushes of rose, hibiscus and gnarly frangipani trees. It seems to yearn for a driver, a car and the kind of money we do not have. Behind the house, tall cypresses and sapodilla trees tower over a clearing. Samantha does not belong to us and nor we to her. She exclaims this loudly as I inch along the walls, chasing the newest villain from *McGyver* or *Knight Rider*. Our threadbare furniture seems lost here, scattered amongst wide rooms that demand old world opulence. Samantha is not ours; we rent her from Mr Jayawardena, an old Christian friend of Ammi's father. Most of

all, I learn that you, like me, do not like Samantha. Here, you're different. Gone are the bike and your leisurely strolls with village lads. You wear black loafers that are polished every Sunday night. You carry a leather brief case and catch the 5.40 am bus to Kandy Central with us as we ride to school. In the evening, you return with reddened eyes and sit silent and morose as Ammi recounts some story about a visit to her elder sister, or a local woman whose daughter has suddenly blossomed into a beauty despite her crooked teeth, or a girl in my class who has won an elocution competition.

Despite my misgivings about Samantha, it is here that I make my foray into modern world occupied by other children. It is here that I discover Christmas and television and an older sister who has been tucked away at a boarding school for the first four years of my life. At Christmas our landlord, Mr Jayawardena, arrives unannounced carrying a basket covered with a red checked cloth. Inside are slices of iced fruitcake decked in silver and gold foil, bon-bons in tins wrapped with red ribbon, gingerbread biscuits and cards with fat cherubs and scalloped edges wishing 'Seasons Greetings.' Ammi calls Mr Jayawardena 'uncle' and kisses him on both cheeks. He is tall with an elongated nose and a half moon smile, not unlike a drawing found in the pages of Quentin Blake. After he leaves, Ammi tells us about her youth when she and her family were always invited to the Jayawardena's Christmas parties held in the large clearing beyond the house. 'Imagine,' she says, 'tables under parasols of blue and green and Chinese lanterns strung across the Cypress trees, gramophone music and dancing all night to Pat Boone and Jim Reeves.' The Jayawardenas know how to show their austere Buddhist friends a good time. But these stories do not sway

you and you do not smile at Ammi's wistful remembrances. Instead, you go out into the woods and return with a branch from a Cypress tree and a plant pot. That night, my sister and I fill the pot with pebbles to make the branch stand upright. We string together the bon bon wrappers and bits of ribbon to decorate our first and only Christmas tree.

One evening as I watch *Manimal* you sit behind me in your singlet on one of our old wicker chairs, tossing a piece of charcoal between your fingers. It is something I have seen you do often. I am so transfixed by Manimal's metamorphosis into a sabre tooth tiger on that grainy screen that I don't notice the charcoal squeaking along the floor behind me. When I turn around, you are leaning forward with a knitted brow, tracing a square on the floor.
'What's that Appachi?' I ask. But you don't answer and I watch as the large square leads to a series of smaller adjoining squares whilst the charcoal dust blurs and feathers each of your straight lines. A part of me wonders what Ammi will make of those charcoal lines on her polished floor but you seem pleased and sit back to admire your handiwork.
'That's our house,' you say after a while. 'This is the house we're going to build.'

1988, January, Muruthalawa, Kandy

One night, not long after your forty ninth birthday, you fail to come home. Ammi stands at the window, fingers gripping each bar, quivering with the sound of each bus and passing car. It is an image that repeats from the first eight years of my life: my mother at a window, a perpetual Penelope, waiting and waiting for you to return. But this time, she is still in white mourning clothes from her

father's funeral a month earlier. We are still living in Samantha despite your vision of a house that is to be ours. Over that year, I have caught snatches of conversation about the land Ammi has inherited, not far from where we live, and her wedding bangles that now sit in a vault in the bank.

You arrive home at dawn the next morning pulling a checked suitcase on wheels. The boys that hang around the bus stop on the corner have followed you home like stray pups and you flip a few cents in to their hands. Your mood is jovial and I am intrigued by the case, laying it on its side to fiddle with the lock and trying to mount it like a horse. 'Be careful with that,' you say, 'it's coming to London with me.' You tell us that three years is not a long time and that you have waited your entire life to pass the diplomatic exam that would take you to the embassy in London. In three years, you tell us, you could easily earn the money needed to build our house. In three years, you tell us, you could save enough money so that we never need ask anyone for anything again. Ammi's bangles would come home, back to their rightful place in the velvet lined box in her wardrobe.

You leave that February on a scorching day. Samantha is alive with friends, relatives and colleagues that have come from far and wide to bid you farewell. But I don't partake in Samantha's joy; like the people that now fill her rooms, she conspires against me, bringing to life new and nameless terrors. I watch from the sides as an uncle adjusts your new magenta tie and another polishes your shoes. You are handsome again with a quickness in your eyes. Then nervous and animated as elders ask about the weather in England and the whereabouts of your passport. On my feet are new Bata sandals that you have bought as a

parting gift. They are blue and the sole resembles the tyres of a motorcycle. Although I have tried to wear them in, they still pinch the tender place between my front toes. All day, as I weave through unknown relatives, wanting to snatch a moment when you might lift me in to your arms, the pinch eats away at my skin and my memory of you.

1988, May, Muruthalawa, Kandy

Three months after you've gone, Ammi decides that she too is done with Samantha and her menacing walls. Ammi does not sleep much in those days, and when she does, I hear her breath hoarse and shallow next to me. When we walk through the Kandy bus stand after school, Ammi hooks my hand into the crook of her elbow and I think I can hear the thud of her heart. Our furniture is packed again onto a van and the boxes and other belongings are carried by hand up the road to her brother's house where we have been given a room in the downstairs quarters. The room is just big enough to contain three single beds, a wardrobe and a table. It overlooks a large courtyard where my late grandfather once kept homing pigeons. As if by habit, the pigeons return every morning and their cooing is the sound I am woken by. You write to us, though not frequently. In your first letter, you send me luggage tags from the plane, stickers with furry kittens and a cellophane bread bag with a picture of a smiling sun; you can't quite believe that people in England demand such fripperies as bread bags to be decorated for their pleasure. You write about the cold that makes your toes swell, riding on red buses and trains that run like electric worms beneath the ground. These things are hard for me to imagine. During that time, you also begin to send money for Ammi to begin work on the house.

One morning, my sister, Ammi and I walk through the peppercorn orchards and coconut groves to the small plot of land where the house is to be built. It is a clearing high on a hill overlooking a valley platformed by small, glassy paddy fields. To walk to the main road, we have to chase a trail through jack fruit trees whilst parting wild overhanging tendrils from the thick canopy above. There would have to be steps, carved deep into the hillside to avoid leeches on my legs and stains on my school uniform. We are met at the bottom of the hill by the foreman, dressed immaculately in a white shirt and sarong, holding a ceremonial coconut in his hands. He calls Ammi 'nona' and offers to bless the ground before the foundations can be laid. We climb up the mound of red earth that has been dug so the ground breaking can begin. Ammi nods and speaks quietly, unaccustomed to dealings with labouring men. He utters prayers and the other men bow their heads as the coconut smashes to pieces on the ground. Afterwards, the foreman offers incense and we too hold our hands in prayer as the first stone is laid in the ground.

In the weeks that follow we walk there often, sometimes after school and sometimes on a Saturday morning. Nothing seems to resemble a house at first. A cement mixer whirrs in the corner and the men heave blocks from one side to the other, waist deep in the ground with lashes of grey across their shoulders. I look for signs, for walls that might resemble the picture you drew on the floor. The scent of that newly dug earth is velvety and fresh in my mind when I get back to the room. I want to write to you about its squelching softness, about the way that the clumps of red crumble to reveal tiny roots and tributaries from

embryonic trees in the palm of your hand. I don't think of the house as something being built but a being, a creature rearing its head and rising from the ground to meet all of us, but especially you. One day, Ammi's younger brother comes with his Kodak and takes a few coloured shots to send to you. It's no longer a vision in just your mind, but something solid, aching to be alive. On the back of the photographs, Ammi writes short descriptions about the build, pointing out the direction of the sunrise and the views that await us.

And then the rains come, the money stops and the curfews begin.

1988, November, Muruthalawa, Kandy

By now, the schools have been shut for two months and the power cuts have become a daily occurrence. Your last payment reaches us in June and now the workers have moved on, having no further instructions from you or Ammi. It is a strange time that no one can tell you about. The telephone wires have been severed and the postal service interrupted so nothing can reach us from afar. During the day, Ammi, her brother, and his wife huddle around the radio and keep checking the storeroom to count the bushels of rice that remain. No one thinks to scold me as I peddle a bike over anthills and avoid doing sums. The buses stop running one day and no one ventures beyond their door after sunset. For dinner, I crunch margarine on bread sprinkled with sugar. At night, we lie still in our beds, listening to the footfall of machete wielding men beyond our back door. We learn the art of lifting our nightdresses high and urinating into a tin can at the foot of the bed. Sometimes, I catch the whispers uttered over the garden gate; stories of councillors hacked to death in their beds and words

daubed in red across the doors of local shops. Then one evening, the unmistakable stench of petrol and burning tyres drifts over in the wind. People press rags to their noses and peer through their gates. The smell lasts for the entire week until no one can remember what it was like to breathe without an acrid metallic taste on the tongue. These are things that you don't see and don't know. We don't visit the plot anymore and I think about it sometimes lying in bed at night, the half formed walls and the earth deadened, waiting to be summoned to life. I didn't know then that we would never visit the plot again.

1989, St.John's Wood, London

London in Winter is cruel to those without a tongue. Mine has retreated to the back of my mouth, lost with feint remembrances of being rushed through an air port and arriving in a place where trees resemble skeletons rising from the pavement. I scale the playground with its steely tarmac. A girl takes my red umbrella and prances around, reducing my name to a sing-song rhyme that I can't repeat. The others watch. Sometimes they join in. A boy in my class decides to replace my name with one he thinks is more suitable: Paki. Catch, run, over, wicket, bus, tap, cheerio, ta-ta, cupboard, David Hasselhoff, Michael Jackson, suitcase: these words, the only ones I know, are insufficient to negotiate the tribulations of playground life. I don't tell you much about these things though.

Our new house is number fifty, Townsend Road, with a proper upstairs, a chimney and three bedrooms. I call it the Townsend house and for years afterwards, it springs to life with every viewing of Mary Poppins. It comes complete with a chauffeur who lives below and a beige carpet that remembers

the imprint of your feet. You tell us that we must be careful with this house not to leave our fingerprints on the wall or to run the tap for too long. It is not ours to touch and hold but the embassy's to which it will return in time.

Here, you have a moustache, a tan Macintosh, a cupboard full of peacock coloured ties and a collection of new things on a dresser in the bedroom: Old Spice, Bryl Creem, breath mints and cuff links with tiny glittering lions. You move quickly through the house and through the streets as we pace behind you. A new force comes to life as you trace lines on maps and raise your head to read street signs and hail black cabs with a wave of the hand. Here, I don't know who you are. Ammi watches you from afar, muffled in layers of jumpers and coats, long johns under her sari and thick woolen socks on her feet, her face frozen in an expression no one can read. You don't speak of the past, or the house or the places and people we once knew. None of us seem to remember. Strange how embossed walls and soft carpeting can dull the edge of every memory. As for me, I sit bewitched before the screen every day after school. Ed the Duck, Quality Streets, Top of the Pops, and the dazzling beauty of Kylie and Jason; these new and dangerous delights worm their way into the starved corners of my mind.

One day, a letter arrives.

You sit with it for hours under the dying light of the winter sun before any of us are allowed to see. Then you hand the photos over, one by one. The first shows the porch of a house with a singular white column and a doorway without a door. Grey and brown octagonal tiles form a mosaic on the floor from where two long

rectangular steps rise to meet the doorway. At this angle, it is impossible to see a roof. You tell me that the work has begun again and that soon after the rooms are completed, there will be a roof, waiting for us to return. The second photo is of a room, no bigger than a box, all whitewashed walls and a window without a frame. Is it my room? I ask. You tell me with a smile that this will be the indoor lavatory. Through this hole in the wall peeks the large leaf of a nearby tree, a resplendent interloper, unwilling to surrender the place to us. It is alive again, the house, but something wavers in your eyes. At that moment, sitting on your lap, I know that we will never live there.

Over the years, the photos cease altogether and you no longer speak of the house. As your time at the embassy comes to an end, our names join the hundreds and thousands on lists waiting for asylum, unable to return to a country we no longer recognise. We move from the town house in St.John's wood to a two bed flat in Kilburn to a bedsit in Neasden to a masionette near Dollis Hill. The house gets resigned to the pile of things we left behind: people, places, toys in cupboards reduced to dust. Meanwhile, wars are lost and won and insurrections are silenced forever. There are rumours that once the two rooms were completed, my uncle rented it out. But with no one to manage the upkeep, the surrounding forest grew wild and blocked the pathway to the house from the road. Somehow, it gets lost in legal wrangles when the local authority tries to seize the land and finally gets returned on the basis that you or Ammi will return. Now it sits in the throes of arrested development, lost to the annals of time, sheltering monkeys from the rain. Its unfinished walls haunt every house you find. Sometimes I see it in your eyes and other times in my sleep, silently uttering

the story of another life we might have had. In my dreams, you blow away the charcoal dust from your hands and look me in the eye. It is there again, perfectly formed, three rooms, a front door, the map of your heart on the living room floor.

About the Author

Sulaxana Hippisley has been an A-level English teacher for the last eleven years and works in a Sixth form college in North London. Her short stories have been longlisted by the Bristol Short Story Prize, Desi Writers Lounge and she was the runner up in the Asian Writer Short Story Competition in 2014. In 2017, she was selected to be part of the Almasi League, a writer development programme run under the tutelage of Courttia Newland and the Arts Council. The Spread the Word Life Writing Prize is her first foray into memoir writing. She is currently working on a short story collection and lives in North West London with her three-year-old daughter.