

The Goat Thief

The Goat Thief

Perumal Murugan

Translated by
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 juggernaut

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For

Reji George Verghese

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Preface

A World of Exceptions

In my experience, the short story is a highly challenging form in modern literature. Whenever I think of writing a short story, I am reminded of the art of drawing kolams practised in Tamil homes. The aim is to draw – during the early hours of morning, in the shadowy predawn light – a beautiful kolam at the entrance to your house. After spending a long time sweeping and cleaning the front yard, you pick up the kolam powder, and the idea that strikes you at that moment will take shape as the kolam. The simple one drawn with just four dots by a hand that weaves and crosses between them can be beautiful as never seen before. The grand one that is as wide as the street

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and drawn after hard practice over long hours can turn out to be an unsightly mess. Looking at the finished kolam from a distance, you may feel that something is amiss. A stray flower, picked up and placed at the centre, can erase the flaw and bring perfection to your doorway. It could be that nothing you do brings satisfaction and you move on, resigned to what seems fated for the day. It's the same with the short story.

Writing a new short story within the universe of the Tamil short story, which has thrived and flourished since the 1930s, can be challenging. More than any other form, it's in the short story that modern Tamil literature has brought off its greatest accomplishments. The number of short stories written in Tamil probably runs into hundreds of thousands; of them, at least several thousand pass muster. Among those, several hundred stand the test of time and endure. If a writer wants to write a short story that will take its place among those hundreds, an independent mind, a unique perspective on life and well-honed writing skills are essential.

When I started writing short stories, I didn't have any such awareness. As I wrote and

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read more and more over the years, I became conscious of these requirements. Taking them into consideration, I set aside the problem of form and started paying attention to the theme of the story. I realized all stories fall into one of two categories. The first category focuses on the problems of living according to the rules of society, while the second concentrates on exceptions to these rules. Both strategies have their advantages and disadvantages.

When he talks about rules, a writer can bring a story alive by striking a note of mild sorrow. And what is this sorrow? It is the wretchedness of taking every step in life with the fear that one might violate the rules. But it's never easy to focus on rules. It can be an uphill task to try to find a storyline inside that dreary world. On the other hand, exceptions can draw our attention easily. The lone goat that strays out of line inevitably appears distinct, doesn't it? At the same time, exceptions are subjected to derision, abuse and apathy, and constantly run the risk of being rejected.

It's my nature to feel concerned and affectionate towards those who are exceptions. They are afflicted with the misery of being unable to live according to rules. They face endless harassment

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and vilification. Isolating themselves from others, they create their own private worlds. Nevertheless, they experience the immense joy that transgression brings. They are the ones who render the old rules defunct and lead us to new ways of being. They function to the best of their creative abilities. In this way, they fulfil their historical role of taking society forward. My own choice is to know and to follow the rules, and to live under their authority. Even so, I look upon this as a stepping stone to a mode of conscious defiance.

Talking about exceptions requires great courage. One false step, and the rules will turn up in their thousands like a giant swarm of ants and tear your flesh apart. I've written with a sense of caution; I've written without it too. What can I do? Exceptions have the seductive power to make you forget yourself. Once we are trapped by the magic of their allure, we can no longer carve our own path. They will take us wherever they want. Everything we encounter along the way is bound to be new: new sights, new beings, new objects. Exceptions have a way of demanding and bestowing new perspectives.

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Ten years ago, I published a collection of stories called *Pee Kadaigal* (Shit Tales). I know people who were furious on hearing the title, others who were ashamed to buy the book, still others who felt too shy to carry it in their hands after having bought it, those who took it home and kept it under wraps, and those who read it in secret. For all that, the stories in the collection were just plain, ordinary tales. All that the tales did was expose what were classified as euphemisms in traditional Tamil grammar and were hidden out of sight. Even today, when I am introduced at a literary meeting, *Pee Kadaigal* is not included in the list of books authored by me. I've always considered the omission inadvertent and habitually referred to it in my subsequent talk. For, why would a person who writes of "The World of Exceptions" worry overmuch about civility and refinement?

I wrote my first short story in 1988, and I have written more than eighty short stories so far. This book is a selection of ten stories, and the only criterion for their selection is the successful realization of the form. All these stories are about

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exceptions. Therefore, I place them, radiant as they are with the seductive allure and fresh perspectives characteristic of exceptions, before the reader.

I wish to thank the translator N. Kalyan Raman, who has wonderfully assimilated these stories, enhanced my dialect-inflected prose style and translated them into English; Juggernaut Books for publishing the first collection of my stories in English translation; and my friend Kalachuvadu Kannan who undertook all the efforts required to make this book possible.

3 September 2017
Namakkal, Tamil Nadu

Perumal Murugan

1

The Well

He seemed reluctant when they invited him. 'Me?' he mumbled softly, as if to himself. But in his gleaming heart, newly cleansed of moss-like memories, desire and eagerness swelled and rose. The children began to badger him further. He had come there as a guest. He was in fact a fairly close relative. Because he hadn't visited them often, he couldn't be totally at ease. A short while later, the children – three of them between the ages of eight and twelve: two boys and a girl – were ready to roll around on his lap and use him as a referee for their games. This invitation had come as the high point of that readiness. He was excited, feeling a mild thrill in his heart, as if he had just received a long-submerged memento. He couldn't get up immediately and leave with them. The fine threads of diffidence had bound his feet. His perspiring soles had turned the floor beneath them damp and

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sticky. He filled his eyes with desire and let them wander about aimlessly. His voice choked in his throat. Crinkling their eyes, the children touched his jaw and pleaded with him, grabbed his hand possessively and pulled him up. As he got up with a jerk, the cot screeched and made a loud noise. He was afraid that some voice might command them, 'Don't disturb him, da' and disrupt the situation. He thought it would be wise to leave with them before that happened. He restrained his eagerness and said in a tone of offering a concession, 'But I haven't brought a towel,' like it was a major problem. Shouting excitedly, the children rushed everywhere and brought a towel each. With a shy smile spreading over his features, he got up from the cot.

Amid the fields pervaded by the smell of vegetation, the well appeared suddenly like the gaping mouth of the land. The well had neither proper walls nor a regular shape. It looked open and desolate, with flab bulging out in places and wounds in the form of pit holes all over. There was a foot-worn track going down that resembled a series of steps. The pipe from the motor was half submerged in the water and quite still. Sunlight

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that passed through coconut fronds penetrated the water to reveal the sand at the bottom. It was a well whose very appearance would make anyone's legs itch to jump in. The children were arguing and fighting over which of them should jump in first. Only the beginning was important. It was enough to hear the splash, followed by the sloshing of water. The frozen silence of the well had to be broken first. After that, the frenzy would infect everyone. The difficulty was in getting started, unhampered by dread that the well was waiting to claim the first one who jumped as votive sacrifice. Undressed by now, the children continued their bickering. Even as the children's attention was focused on fighting among themselves, he dived neatly into the well, like a ripe coconut detaching itself from a bunch and dropping to the ground. Immediately the children jumped in, one by one, from each corner of the well. Now the once-frozen well began to speak through a variety of sounds. There was the constant noise of water splashing and colliding against the walls. The children had trails they could clamber up to jump into the well again. As if their sole aim that day was to torment the

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water by jumping in, the splash and sloshing that followed jumping were heard continuously.

He experienced the well differently. While swimming, he stroked the water gently, as if he was embracing a flower-soft baby. The irregular shape of the well gave him immense pleasure. As the sun was really hot, the coldness of the water felt like a poultice all over the body. He enjoyed dunking his head frequently under water; he also liked swimming on his back. The sun's rays which had scattered on the well came looking for him as he lay inside that deep hollow and struck him on the face. The well held a hoard of miracles within, and was giving it to him, little by little. Intense ardour for the well bloomed in his heart. He craved to caress and embrace its every speck. He spent a long time travelling towards each of its corners which were strewn with cobwebs pushed aside by the sloshing water. Each corner formed a small niche where a person could stand and rest – or at least had formations like railings that a swimmer could hold on to. The well was full of compassion. In the corners, he experienced the pleasure of ice-cold water. He wanted to plunge towards the depths and get to know the well's nether parts. A

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few seconds after going down the centre of the well, he sensed that he had submerged a long way inside. The well stretched even deeper. Unable to grasp how deep and how long he had travelled, he struggled to breathe. He pressed his hands down quickly and rose upward. There were so many secrets inside the well. Was it going to unpack and spread them out in barely a few minutes for an occasional visitor like him? What kind of fool am I, he scolded himself. He sat on a flat stone slab near the steps leading upward and relaxed a little. He eyed with fresh wonder the frogs that clung to the walls with every shift of the water as well as those that leapt into the water from above. He felt for a brief while that he was merely a spectator at the well.

The children did not tire at all. Ignoring the mud sliding down from the walls, they kept climbing up and jumping off by turns. He saw little difference between them and the frogs. He felt that the well was watching them with gentle amusement that was like a smile rising to an old man's lips. When the girl stretched and jumped, with her tassel loose and ribbon fluttering in the wind, it was as if the well obediently received and

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held up a little angel as she descended amid the splendour of sunshine. The boys were so quick that their climbing up or jumping down went by in a blur. The well proudly accepted their meaningless shouts. It was perhaps relishing all these capers with the attitude of someone who had been engrossed in companionless solitude for too long and was tired of it. The secret breeze that embraced his body caused a chill. All the droplets that rolled down from his body had mingled with the well. Once the body was dry, the tremors began. The cold he didn't feel while he was in the water gripped him suddenly when he went up a little. In fact, it was the well's trickery. Its invitation to step in. If a man visited once, the well cast a spell that goaded him to return again and again. He dived through a wave. Now lukewarm water caressed his skin and embraced him. Without being conscious of it, he thought of the well as a circle and swam a full round. Though the traces of his leg strokes kept disappearing instantly, the eddies remained. They induced him to swim another round. Meanwhile, the little girl called out to him:

‘Chittappa, how many rounds can you go without stopping?’

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He was unable to give her a number. He scanned the well. Its expanse, devoid of sharp angles, did not lead him to any conclusion. Not having an answer, he offered a bland, evasive smile. She was adamant.

‘Can you do ten rounds?’

The boy answered her question: ‘Chittappa can’t even swim two.’

Though he could sense that the boy had said it only to provoke him, he was of a mind to give it a try and face the challenge. A round consisted of starting from the step, touching every corner, one by one, and returning to the step. By the time he finished the first round and was midway through the second, his respiratory organs felt weak from the strain. He started breathing through the mouth. His arms were tired and his legs refused to cooperate. However much he tried, he simply could not go on. The well had defeated him again. Stopping at a corner, he doubled over and gasped for breath. Their shouts were so loud and deafening that he wondered if the well itself was rejoicing in his defeat. The shouts compounded his humiliation. He wanted to climb up and go away. The well was a universe that no one could conquer.

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He had to accept his defeat. To compete with it and lose was in itself an act of courage. He sighed with a swell of pride. He swam towards the step. His arms stroked the water with the pious modesty of a devotee holding the rope of a sacred chariot. On reaching the steps, he took a last dip, combed his hair back with the water and said:

‘I’m going up. If you want to keep playing, come back after you’re done.’

His announcement must have given them a rude shock. For a few moments, there was no sound except the gentle sloshing of water in the well. A pall of sorrow had settled on the little girl’s face. The boys looked dejected. They couldn’t accept that the pleasures of the well had to end so soon. If he got out of the well, they had to follow suit. They were not permitted to be in the well without any adult to mind them. The well harboured so many threats within. There could be venomous old snakes hatching in the holes high above the water. In some evil moment, those snakes might stretch their heads and come out. There could be hidden rock cavities that trapped and dragged underwater swimmers inside. There was the ever-present danger of slipping and plummeting under

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water. Adults could handle such situations, but children...? Moreover, it was a lone well sloshing at the centre of a ring of tall coconut trees. It looked haunted. The echo of voices could arrive from any direction. An eerie silence had come to dwell permanently in the black water. If the man who was a protective shield against all these dangers went up, it was the end. The little girl started again in the same pleading tone that she had used to invite him to the well.

‘No, chittappa. Some more time, chittappa.’

Her pleas did not affect him now in any way. He was resolute in his decision to leave. With a disdainful smile on his face, he took another step forward. From where she was standing in the east corner, the girl leapt effortlessly in the water and came near him. She clung tightly to his legs. Drenched hair swaying, she begged him, ‘Don’t go, chittappa.’ He had not expected this. Her hands held his legs like a snake twisted and wound around them. ‘Let go, kannu...let go,’ he said. He imagined that these ordinary words were enough to free him of her obstinacy. But she would not let him go. I won’t let go till you grant me a boon, her bent figure seemed to plead with him.

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He didn't understand any of it. In his confusion, he bent down and tried gently to prise her fingers from his legs. Her grip only grew tighter instead of loosening.

'Don't let him get away, girl,' a voice called out from somewhere. Even then he thought it was the playful stubbornness of children and responded with a relaxed laugh. At an unexpected moment, the girl's hands swept his legs off the step and pushed him inside. As a stone protruding from a wall comes loose and drops, he fell into the water with a loud splash. The water-whip struck him a hard blow on the stomach. Electrons of fear raced through his entire body. He gathered himself and swam back to the step. He wondered if this too was a defeat at the hands of the well. Pretending that it was nothing like that, he spoke to the girl in an appeasing tone – 'Why did you do that, kannu?' – as he started climbing up. Now the older boy was standing on the step – not really a step, just a stone protruding from the wall – above him. The boy spread his arms wide and swung them up and down while he shouted, 'I'm not going to let you pass!' As he lifted a leg, determined to make his way up, the boy bent down, hugged his neck

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and rolled over. Both fell together into the well. He dragged the boy into the water and, thrusting his leg forward, gave him a hard push downward before swimming back quickly to the step. The boy could return only after touching the mud at the bottom. He pushed hard at the girl who came at him aiming to clasp his neck, and leapt on to the steps. 'Ei!' With an energetic bellow, another boy jumped on him. It was an entirely unexpected moment. He dropped into the water again. His eyes were dazzled by the light that came boring through the water. He tried to see through the droplets. There were only incomprehensible sights everywhere. He grew agitated. There was no way to escape other than climbing up and running for it. But there was another boy just above the step. Suddenly, a kind of order had come about among them: one to struggle with him in the water, one to clutch his legs and prevent him from climbing on to the step, and one standing above to jump on him and bring him down. They occupied their respective positions by turns. They had morphed into a heavy shackle around him that couldn't be broken.

For how long could he continue playing this

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game? What was this game, anyway? It was only the well's cunning trick disguised as a game. He had not visited anyone's house as a guest. The well had brought him. No one had invited him to swim. The well had sent its emissaries in human form. He didn't know their faces. The well was the fount of all illusion. It was a death pit, asking for votive sacrifice. He had conveniently got trapped inside the well's gigantic maw. How wrong he was to think they were children. Three demons who were foot servants of the well. One leapt at him, aiming for his neck. One pulled him off his feet. One rolled around and wrestled with him under water. Their laughs were invitations that would suck the life out of him. The little demons were crazed with hunger. How could he ever get away?

The pit holes on the walls of the well turned into dark caves where death was hiding itself. The water was an acid solution that burnt the skin black. Did he possess enough strength as a swimmer to triumph over these? Climbing on to the walls, the toads stood there with their spinning eyes and gaping mouths. They were ready to knock him down at any moment. When the demons

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wilted from exhaustion, the toads could pounce on him. Fear spread through his entire body and dropped anchor there. It didn't even permit him to think about anything. Driven more and more by the urge to go up and escape, he tried again and again, sliding back into the well each time. His belly was bloated from swallowing all that water. Tremors had taken root in his entire body. All the scrapes and wounds in many parts of his body from those awkward falls were now inflamed. He ignored all of it. He remained focused on escaping. Their aim was to destroy him little by little and finally devour him, it seemed. He turned fierce like a terrified animal battling certain death. He caught and thrashed the demons that came to capture him. He pushed them with a thrust of his leg towards the bottom of the well. But their fury, too, grew to match his.

This death pit might have some other exit paths. He leapt towards a corner. He could hardly stand. His legs were shaking. Sweat flowed more profusely than the water streaming down his body. Taking his move to the corner as their victory, those demons jumped for joy. His searching eyes

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fell on the motor pipe. His hands flew with the urgency of finding a hold. Clutching the pipe, he started climbing swiftly. He guessed that it was the only way available to get out from there. As he climbed, he had to battle very hard with the pipe's smooth body. Although it shook this way and that, it held strong, without changing position. The climactic frenzy of the game had caught everywhere. These might be the very moments that decided victory and defeat. As he kept climbing, a figure resembling a large blob of treacle came sliding down the pipe at great speed and dashed against him. His grip slackened and he fell straight into the water. That was it. Everything was decided, it seemed to him. He began to babble incoherently. His arms were involuntarily stroking the water. He didn't know in which direction he was swimming. He couldn't sense where the hold was. His hands clutched at all manner of things. His trembling legs climbed on to something else. It might have been a parapet of the well. His hands seemed to be grasping the edges of protruding stones. He felt that he had climbed some distance. It gave him confidence and drew him up. He vaulted