Notes

page numbers refer to the Vintage trade paperback

And this is how I see the East ... I see it always from a small boat - not a light, not a stir, not a sound. We conversed in low whispers, as if afraid to wake up the land ... It is all in that moment when I opened my young eyes on it. I came upon it from a tussle with the sea.

JOSEPH CONRAD, 'YOUTH'

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) was a Polish-British writer who is generally regarded as one of the central figures in the literature of the late 19th and early 20th century. "Youth" is an autobiographical short story about a young sailor's first voyage to the East as remembered by an older version of the protagonist. Like The Cat's Table it is a coming-of-age story that is similarly concerned with memory and way that experience can prove transformative to one's mental and intellectual growth.

They entered the Fort and the car slipped silently past the post office building and the clock tower. At this hour of the night there was barely any traffic in Colombo (3).

The Fort is the central business district of Colombo -- the commercial capital and largest city of Sri Lanka (called Ceylon at the time). The story is set in the early 1950s, just after Ceylon became an independent member of the British Commonwealth of Nations. Before that, Ceylon had been a British colony (1815–1948), and even earlier had been, first, under the control of Portuguese (1597–1658) and, after that, the Dutch (1640–1796). To avoid confusion, I will call the nation Sri Lanka in the notes, since that is the island's modern name.

He’d never slept under a blanket before, save once in Nuwara Eliya (4).

a city in the hill country of the Central Province, Sri Lanka

He did not go back up on deck for a last look, or to wave at his relatives who had brought him to the harbour. He could hear singing and imagined the slow and then eager parting of families taking place in the thrilling night air. I do not know,
even now, why he chose this solitude. Had whoever brought him onto the Oronsay already left (4)?

The most obvious prototype for the Oronsay in *The Cat’s Table* was an actual passenger vessel named the Oronsay (completed in 1951) for the British Orient Steam Navigation Company-- also known as the Orient Line (it will be called this in the novel). It travelled between Australia and Great Britain-- stopping off in Colombo, Bombay, Port Aden (in what is now Yemen), and Port Said (in Egypt) before making its way through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean Sea (Museum Victoria). The ship itself set a new standard in luxury and convenience in both first and tourist class. There was a games deck for recreation, a swimming pool, a lounge and Grill Restaurant, and various other amenities. All told there were seven decks accessible to first class passengers at the bow of the ship and six decks located aft for those travelling tourist class (Goossens).

**Departure**

WHAT HAD THERE been before such a ship in my life (6)?

The point of view shifts in this chapter to the young Michael, moving from the third person "he" to the first person "I." This will persist through the rest of the novel.

A launch in *Trincomalee harbor* (6)?

a large natural harbor situated on the north-east cost of Sri Lanka

The longest journeys I had made were car rides to *Nuwara Eliya* and *Horton Plains*, or the train to *Jaffna*, which we boarded at seven a.m. and disembarked from in the late afternoon (6).

Nuwara Eliya and Horton Plains are both in Central Province in Sri Lanka. Jaffna is the capital of Northern Province, close to India.

We made that journey with our egg sandwiches, some *thalagulies*, a pack of cards and a small *Boy’s Own adventure* (6).

*Thalagulies* are sweet sesame balls. *Boy’s Own* was British magazine title with articles and stories meant to appeal to adolescent boys.
I had assumed I would be taking a bus by myself and then change onto another at Borella Junction (7).

Borella is the largest suburb in Colombo.

As I got into the car, it was explained to me that after I’d crossed the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, and gone through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean, I would arrive one morning on a small pier in England and my mother would meet me there. It was not the magic or the scale of the journey that was of concern to me, but that detail of how my mother could know when exactly I would arrive in that other country. And if she would be there (7).

In 1954, the actual eleven year old Michael Ondaatje travelled alone from Sri Lanka to Great Britain after his parent’s divorce. His mother, who had left for England five years earlier, met him at voyage’s end. The trip took three weeks, and Ondaatje remembers almost nothing about what actually happened aboard the ship.

The Cat’s Table, then, is an imaginary account of a boy named Michael who is, on the one hand, an obvious surrogate for the author (the protagonist of the book grows up to be a writer living in Canada, much like Ondaatje himself), yet at the same time, the circumstances Michael experiences in the novel are almost completely fictional. As Ondaatje has remarked in interview, “I read somewhere that people who lose their childhood eventually have to retrieve it” (McCrum).

‘We seem to be at the cat’s table,’ the woman called Miss Lasqueti said. ‘We’re in the least privileged place’ (8).

Critic Jonathan Cape writes:

The ocean liner, the Oronsay, is a floating microcosm of 1950s social mores and hierarchies. Michael dines at the “cat’s table” – the “least privileged place”, farthest from the captain (who, it transpires, is “not fond of his Asian cargo”). This is where he befriends two other Ceylonese boys and escapes the supervision of an almost-aunt in first class. Such social invisibility lets the boys observe any drama unseen. Events on the ship will ultimately seal Michael’s distrust of the “authority and prestige of all Head Tables.”

One of the two boys at our table was named Ramadhin (8)

Ramadhin is a surname. Ondaatje never reveals his given name in the novel.

We had a botanist, and a tailor who owned a shop up in Kandy (8).
a major city in Sri Lanka, located in the Central Province; it is the second largest city in the country after Colomb. He also had a complete run of the ship, for he was doing safety research for the Orient Line. He introduced us to his cohorts in the engine and furnace rooms, and we watched the activities that took place down there. Compared to First Class, the engine room – at Hades level – churned with unbearable noise and heat (9).

in Greek mythology, an underground otherworld where souls go after death

But there was always Emily, my ‘machang’, who lived almost next door for a period of years (10-11).

This colloquial Sinhala form of address is usually used by males to address a fellow male (hence the quotation marks here) and means “mate” or “brother.”

In the boarding schools we went to, a fear of punishment created a skill in lying, and I learned to withhold small pertinent truths. Punishment, it turns out, never did train or humble some of us into complete honesty. We were, it seems, continually beaten because of miserable report cards or a variety of vices (lounging in the sanatorium for three days pretending to have mumps, permanently staining one of the school bathtubs by dissolving ink pellets in water to manufacture ink for the senior school). Our worst executioner was the junior school master, Father Barnabus, who still stalks my memory with his weapon of choice, which was a long splintered bamboo cane. He never used words or reason. He just moved dangerously among us (12-13).

Ondaatje writes in his semi-fictional memoir Running in the Family:

At St. Thomas’ College Boy School I had written ‘lines’ as punishment. A hundred and fifty times. [fragment in Sinhalese] I must not throw coconuts off the roof of Cobblestone House. [fragment in Sinhalese] We must not urinate again on Father Barnabus’ tires. A communal protest this time, the first of my socialist tendencies. The idiot phrases moved east across the page as if searching for longitude and story, some meaning or grace that would occur blazing after so much writing. For years I thought literature was punishment, simply a parade ground. The only freedom writing brought was as the author of rude expressions on walls and desks (83-84).

Though the punishment here involved Sinhalese (a language the adult Ondaatje no longer speaks or writes fluently), Sri Lankan boarding schools would also teach English, the language of the educated elite.

Ondaatje’s family was Dutch-Ceylonese and, at one time, very prosperous. Ondaatje’s father Mervyn, however, was an alcoholic who squandered away the family’s wealth, eventually driving them to near penury. Nonetheless, their inherited income did allow the family some of the trappings of middle class life, such as being able to send young Michael to boarding school (Spinks 1).

‘Ramadhin … Is that the Muslim boy, from the cricketing family’ (16)?

Sonny Ramadhin (born 1929) was a West Indian cricketer and a dominant bowler (a position roughly equivalent to a pitcher in baseball) of the 1950s.
My uncle was a large, genial man. I had been living with him and his wife in Boralesgamuwa since my mother had left for England some years earlier, and while we never had a long or even brief intimate talk, and while he was always busy in his role as a public figure, he was a loving man, and I felt safe with him (18).

about 9 miles from Colombo, in Western Province

I spoke of it at the Lido pool and I spoke of it around the ping-pong table (18).

British English: public outdoor swimming pool and surrounding facilities

Within half an hour there were four men playing bridge quietly and earnestly (20).

Bridge is a trick-taking game played by four players in two competing partnerships. After the cards are dealt, players bid how many tricks their partnership will take. Each round of play is called a rubber.

At some stage during his travels in the East, he had picked up the habit of wearing a sarong, and most of the time he wore just that around his waist, even when his friends came by (21).

a large tube or length of fabric, often wrapped around the waist and worn by men and women throughout much of South and Southeast Asia

And if I still did not respond, I would hear him whisper 'Mynah,' which had become my nickname (23).

The mynah is a bird of the starling family, native to southern Asia, especially India. Some mynas are considered talking birds, for their ability to reproduce sounds, including human speech, when in captivity.

In terms of the symbolism of the novel, this has two big implications. First, a mynah reproduces sounds by imprinting on an exemplar, suggestive of the way that the experiences on the ship will be important to the identity formation of the adult Michael. Second, as Michael will later say, "[The mynah] is an unofficial bird, and unreliable, its voice not fully trustworthy in spite of the range," suggestive of the way that memory is unreliable (an echo that subtly changes the message) (Zoon and Hebert 16).

One morning Cassius brought out a Gold Leaf cigarette he had found in a lounge, and taught us how to smoke properly (24).

an English brand
Mazappa

MR MAZAPPA SIDLES up beside me, as I am explaining to an ancient passenger the art of unfolding a deckchair in just two moves, links his arm with mine, and makes me walk with him. ‘From Natchez to Mobile,’ he warns me, ‘from Memphis to Saint Joe …’ He pauses at my confusion (28).

These are lines from Harold Arlen’s 1941 song “Blues in the Night” (lyrics by Johnny Mercer):

From Natchez to Mobile,
From Memphis to Saint Joe
Wherever the four winds blow
I been in some big towns
An’ heard me some big talk
But there’s something I know
A woman’s a two-face, a worrisome thing
Who’ll leave you to sing the blues in the night

It is always the suddenness of Mr Mazappa’s arrival that catches me off guard. As I end a lap in the pool he grips my slippery arm and holds me against the side, crouching there. ‘Listen, my peculiar boy, women will sweet-talk, and give you the big eye … I am protecting you with what I know’ (28).

More lyrics from the same song:

My mama done tol’ me, when I was a little
My mama done told me, “Son a woman will sweet talk
And give you the big eye but when that sweet talk is done
A woman’s a two faced, a woman’s something
That would leave you singing the blues in the night"

Max Mazappa would wake at noon and eat a late breakfast at the Delilah Bar. ‘Give me a couple of one-eyed pharaohs, and a Nash soda, will ya,’ he’d say, chewing a few cocktail cherries while he waited to be served (28).

an egg fried inside a hole punched in a slice of bread

So we were receiving a sort of feverish biography. ‘I took a trip on a train and I thought about you,’ he grumbled, and we thought we were hearing about his sad wasted heart (29).

the first lines from a 1939 song by Jimmy Van Heusen (lyrics by Johnny Mercer)

He taught us the chorus to ‘Hong Kong Blues’ (29).

a 1939 song by Hoagy Carmichael

He was talking to three boys on the verge of pubescence, and he probably knew the effect he was having. But he also imparted to this junior audience stories of musical honour, and the person he celebrated most was Sidney Bechet, who while
Sidney Bechet (1897–1959): an American jazz saxophonist, clarinetist, and composer; he is an important figure in the early history of jazz music

Every month, the changing of the moon.
I say, every month, the changing of the moon,
The blood comes rushing from the bitch’s womb (30).

These are part of the lyrics to Jelly Roll Morton’s “Winin’ Boy Blues,” though Ondaatje cheats a bit here. The official release of the song contains lyrics that are considerably more sanitized.

The bawdier version quoted here was recorded in 1939 by Alan Lomax as part of a series of interviews about the early evolution of jazz music with illustrative performances by Morton. These recordings were not released in full until 1955-- after the timeframe of the novel. On the other hand, it is possible that Ondaatje intends to suggest that Mr Mazappa personally witnessed Jelly Roll Morton perform the song, though this is less likely, as Mr Mazappa would have been just a child when Morton was still actively performing.

Jelly Roll Morton (1890-1941) was an American ragtime and early jazz pianist, bandleader, and composer who started his career in New Orleans. He was a pivotal figure in the development of jazz music, getting his professional start as a piano player in a whore house.

Then Mazappa told me about the dog. ‘It used to come on stage with Bash and growl when his master was playing ... And this is why Bechet broke up with Duke Ellington (32).

Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington (1899-1974): an American composer, pianist, and bandleader of a jazz orchestra; he is one of the most important figures in the history of jazz music; Bechet played briefly with Ellington’s orchestra in 1924

C Deck

It was the same emotion I had when lost in the narrow streets of the Pettah market, or adapting to new, undiscovered rules at school (33).

Also called Manning Market, it is an open market in the suburb of Pettah in the city of Colombo.
Cassius

WHO WOULD NAME a child Cassius, I think now. Most parents have veered from giving a firstborn such a name. Though Sri Lanka has always enjoyed the merging of classical first names with Sinhalese last names – Solomon and Senaka are not common, but they exist (38).

Cassius is the family name of an ancient Roman patrician family. Today, the most famous member of the family is Gaius Cassius Parmensis (ca. 74 BCE-31 or 30 BCE) who was one of the chief conspirators against Gaius Julius Caesar, playing an important role in his assassination. At least in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, Cassius is motivated by a love of liberty, and this is a large part of why Ondaatje chose the name for the character (the allusion is made explicit a few paragraphs after this).

Years later when an old boy donated funds to St Thomas’ for a new cricket pavilion, my friend Senaka said, ‘First they should construct some decent bogs’ (39).

British English: a slang word for lavatory

The Hold

LARRY DANIELS WAS one of those who ate with us at the Cat’s Table. A compact, well-muscled man, he always wore a tie, always had his sleeves rolled up. Born to a burgher family in Kandy, he had become a botanist and spent much of his adult life studying forest and plant cultures in Sumatra and Borneo (43).

The Burgher class were those who were descended, at least in part, from a European colonialist family (Portuguese, Dutch, or British). Ondaatje’s father’s family was part of this class, being of mixed Dutch and Tamil ancestry.

The one piece of information I could honestly give him was that she liked Player’s Navy Cut cigarettes (44).

an English brand, popular in the early twentieth century; the packet featured a portrait of a sailor framed by a lifebuoy

‘She likes the ice creams at Elephant House’ (44)

Elephant House refers to the Ceylon Cold Store that distributed the Elephant House brand of carbonated drinks, ice cream, and processed meat products. The brand dates back to the 19th century.

These things were announced by The Hyderabad Mind, whose face was streaked with purple and whose eyes, rimmed with white paint, looked as if they might have belonged to a giant (45).

Hyderabad is the capital of the southern Indian state of Telangana.

He bent down and we crouched with him while he plucked some heart-shaped leaves. ‘These are Piper betel leaves,’ he said, placing them on my open palm. He
moved on, picked up some slaked lime from a cache and combined it with slivers of areca nut he had in a jute bag, and handed the mixture to Cassius (48).

Betel leaves, like tobacco, are psychostimulating and habit forming. It is consumed widely in South Asia, most commonly by chewing (both with and without tobacco).

It was more difficult going up. Mr Daniels was almost a flight above us, and by the time we got to the top he was outside smoking a beedi that was rolled in white paper rather than a brown leaf (49). a thin, Indian cigarette filled with tobacco flake and wrapped in a tendu or Pilostigma racemosum leaf and tied with a string at one end; Mr Daniels’ “unusual beedi” is probably a marijuana joint

The Turbine Room

As night approached, I missed the chorus of insects, the howls of garden birds, gecko talk. And at dawn, the rain in the trees, the wet tar on Bullers Road, rope burning on the street that was always one of the first palpable smells of the day (53).

The slow burning rope in the marketplace is used as a convenient way to start fires, much like one would use matches. For example, in a 1916 travel article describing Colombo, the author writes, how “Every little distance along the road hung a piece of slowly burning rope fibre from which the men lit their cigarettes while passing” (“A Glimpse of Colombo”).

At Jinadasa’s we bought egg hoppers, and ate them in the middle of the almost deserted street, cups of tea at our feet (54).

A classic Sri Lankan street food, egg hoppers are crêpe-like “bowls” made from rice flour and coconut milk that hold a simply cooked egg.

Whenever we were in Galle, Narayan and Gunepala and I would climb down the ramparts to the sea and swim out so they could fish on the reef for dinner (54).

a major city on the southwestern tip of Sri Lanka

Late in the evening I’d be found asleep at the foot of my ayah’s bed and have to be carried by my uncle to my room (54).

An ayah is a native maid or nursemaid employed by families of European descent in India and Sri Lanka.

I’d watch him pick out any questionable food from a boiling pot with his calloused fingers and fling it ten feet away into the flower beds – a chicken bone or an
overripe thakkali, which would be eaten instantly by the rice hounds that hovered about, knowing this habit of his.

tomato

In his spare time he taught me alternative verses to popular bailas that were full of obscenities, swearing me not to repeat them, as they referred to well-known gentry (55).

Baila is a form of music, popular in Sri Lanka and parts of India, mixing primarily European instruments and rhythms found in Iberia, Sri Lanka, Africa and India.

A thousand years later, I came upon the novels of the Indian writer R. K. Narayan in a London bookstore. I bought every one and imagined they were by my never forgotten friend Narayan (55).

R. K. Narayan (1906-2001): Indian writer, best known for his works set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi

'I know I shall miss it too,' he said. 'And other things. Kothamalli. Balsam. I have such things in my suitcase. For I am leaving forever’ (57).

Kothamalli is coriander. Balsam is an aromatic resinous substance exuded by various trees and shrubs and used as a base for certain fragrances

I am aware of the pathos and the irony that come with such a portrait. All those foxed Penguin editions of Orwell and Gissing and the translations of Lucretius with their purple borders that he was bringing with him (59).

George Orwell (1903-1950): pen name of Eric Arthur Blair, English novelist, essayist, journalist, and critic-- most famous for his novel 1984; George Gissing (1857-1903): English novelist; Titus Lucretius Carus (ca. 99 BCE-ca. 55 BCE): Roman poet and philosophe whose only known work is the epic philosophical poem De rerum natura about the tenets and philosophy of Epicureanism

I think about Mr Fonseka at those English schools wearing his buttoned sweater to protect himself from English weather, and wonder how long he stayed there, and if he did really stay ‘forever’. Or whether in the end he could no longer survive it, even though for him it was ‘the centre of culture’, and instead returned home on an Air Lanka flight that took only two-thirds of a day, to begin again, teaching in a place like Nugegoda (60).

a large, densely populated suburb of Colombo

He pointed out to us the Piper mephisticum that ‘sharpened the mind’ (61).

kava, a root used to make a drink with sedative properties that does not disrupt mental clarity; it is consumed primarily in the Pacific Ocean cultures of Polynesia
A Spell

IF OUR JOURNEY to England was recorded for any reason in the newspapers of the time, it was because of the presence on the Oronsay of the philanthropist Sir Hector de Silva. He had boarded the ship and was travelling with a retinue that included two doctors, one ayurvedic, a lawyer, and his wife and daughter (63).

Ayurveda is a system of medicine with historical roots in the Indian subcontinent. Though its practices are holistic, it is particularly associated with complex herbal cures for various ailments.

Although the reason was that Sir Hector, a Moratuwa entrepreneur, who had ground out his fortune in gems, rubber and plots of land, was now suffering from a possibly fatal illness and was on his way to Europe to find a doctor who would save him (63).

a large suburb of Colombo

besides, ayurvedic practitioners were now also arriving at the house from the Moratuwa district, where the de Silva family walauwa had existed for more than a century, and these men claimed to have successfully treated victims of rabies (66).

the name given to a colonial manor house in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) of a native headmen
Miss Lasqueti

‘Why is it when I hear the phrase “trompe l’oeil” I think of oysters’ (73)?

trompe l’oeil (French): a painting or design intended to create the illusion of a three-dimensional object; oysters are widely considered an aphrodisiac

Miss Lasqueti had, I remember, ‘gunpowder tea’, which she mixed with a cup of hot water at our table, then poured into a thermos before she left us for the afternoon. You could actually see the flush enter her face as the drink knocked her awake (74).

a form of Chinese tea in which each leaf has been rolled into a small round pellet

Then I heard, via Flavia Prins, that an unknown passenger in First Class had informed her that Miss Lasqueti had often been seen in the corridors of Whitehall (74-75).

Whitehall is a road in the City of Westminster, Central London, which is widely used as a metonym for British central governmental administration, and the geographic name for the surrounding area.

The Girl

Whatever we did had no possibility of permanence. We were simply discovering how long our lungs could hold air as we raced back and forth along the bottom of the pool. Because our greatest pleasure was when one hundred spoons were flung by a steward into the pool and Cassius and I dived in with competitors to collect as many as we could in our small hands, relying on those lungs for more and more time underwater. We were watched and cheered and laughed at if our trunks slipped down as we clambered out like amphibious fish with cutlery in our hands, gripping them against our chests (80).

Diving for spoons in the swimming pool is one of the few activities Ondaatje remembers from his actual voyage from Sri Lanka to England (Meacham).

‘I love all men who dive,’ Melville, that great sea-crosser, wrote (80).

Herman Melville (1819-1891): American novelist, short story writer, and poet-- most famous today for his seafaring novel Moby Dick

Thievery

While he did this, I was mostly looking out from one of the portholes at the sea. If they were open I’d hear yells from quoits players on a lower deck (83).

a traditional game which involves the throwing of metal, rope or rubber rings over a set distance, usually to land over or near a spike
There was a wild boy in there, somebody from one of the *Jungle Book* stories whose eyes watched me, white as lamps (84).

*The Jungle Book* (1894) is a collection of stories by English author Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936). The tales in the book are fables, using animals in an anthropomorphic manner to give moral lessons.

The Baron would disembark, prematurely, at Port Said, for by then, suspicions of a thief on board were making the rounds, although they were not of course directed at anyone in First Class. I know that at Aden he mailed off some packages (85).

Port Said is in Egypt, and Aden is in Yemen.

I still remember how he looked, how he dressed, although I am not sure if he was English or one of those mongrels who have assumed the panache of aristocracy (85).

Ondaatje has described himself as a “mongrel” (McCrum), not wholly belonging to either the Eastern world of his boyhood or the Western world of his maturity. Even his heritage is mixed, belonging to the burgher class of Sri Lanka of mixed European and Sri Lankan ancestry (the social class that administrated and ran the country for the colonial powers before independence in 1948) (Zoon and Herbert 10-11).

We were just days away from landing in Aden, so the choice of *The Four Feathers* was, I see now, somewhat tactless, as it attempted to compare the brutality of Arabia with a civilised though foolish England (86).

*a* 1939 Technicolor adventure film directed by Zoltan Korda; set during the reign of Queen Victoria, it tells the story of a man accused of cowardice; it was adapted from the 1902 novel of the same name by A.E.W. Mason

The movie, as we rolled under the gradually disappearing stars, was being shown in two locations. It had begun half an hour earlier in the Pipe and Drums Bar in First Class, projected to a quieter group of about forty well-dressed passengers; when the first reel was over, that segment of the film was rewound and carried in a metal container down to our projector on deck for its *alfresco* showing, while the First Class audience watched the second reel (87).

taking place or located in the open air

THERE ARE TIMES when a storm invades the landscape of the *Canadian Shield*, where I live during the summers, and I wake up believing I am in mid-air, at the height of
the tall pines above the river, watching the approaching lightning, and hearing behind it the arrival of its thunder (89).

the Laurentian Plateau; it stretches north from the Great Lakes to the Arctic Ocean, covering over half of Canada

We heard the Captain announce that they were expecting a fifty-knot gale and to prepare for the worst (90).

a little less than 60 mph

They worked in darkness in the depths of the hold, with only the spray of an oil lamp, doing 'gravedigger’s work', as Joseph Conrad called it, waist deep in the grain (99).

from Conrad's “Youth”:

We were a week working up as far as Yarmouth Roads, and then we got into a gale--the famous October gale of twenty-two years ago. It was wind, lightning, sleet, snow, and a terrific sea. We were flying light, and you may imagine how bad it was when I tell you we had smashed bulwarks and a flooded deck. On the second night she shifted her ballast into the lee bow, and by that time we had been blown off somewhere on the Dogger Bank. There was nothing for it but go below with shovels and try to right her, and there we were in that vast hold, gloomy like a cavern, the tallow dips stuck and flickering on the beams, the gale howling above, the ship tossing about like mad on her side; there we all were, Jermyn, the captain, everyone, hardly able to keep our feet, engaged on that gravedigger's work, and trying to toss shovelfuls of wet sand up to indward. At every tumble of the ship you could see vaguely in the dim light men falling down with a great flourish of shovels. One of the ship’s boys (we had two), impressed by the weirdness of the scene, wept as if his heart would break. We could hear him blubbering somewhere in the shadows.

Whatever the fate might have been for our ship, which was now travelling like a coffin in the cyclone, Sir Hector enjoyed a few good days letting free the truth about his wealth, his hidden pleasures, his genuine affection for his wife, while the vessel plunged into the bowels of the sea and then emerged like an encrusted coelacanth, the ocean pouring off its features, so that machinists, thrown against the red-hot engines, burned their arms, and the supposed cream of the cream of the East stumbled against pickpockets in the long corridors, and band members fell off the dais in the midst of 'Blame It on My Youth’, as Cassius and I lay spreadeagled on the Promenade Deck, under the rain (99-100).

a jazz standard written by Oscar Levant and Edward Heyman in 1934

Landfall

Aden had been a great harbour as early as the seventh century B.C. and was mentioned in the Old Testament. It was where Cain and Abel were buried, Mr Fonseka said, preparing us for the city he himself had never seen (101).
In Abrahamic religions Cain and Abel were two of the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain was a crop farmer, and Abel was a shepherd. When they sacrificed to God, he favored Abel’s sacrifice over Cain’s. Later, Cain killed Abel, committing the first murder. God expelled Cain, but lightened his punishment after Cain complained that his original punishment was too difficult to bear. Cain was the first person born, and Abel was the first to die.

He was also interested in something called ‘khat’ that he had been talking to the ayurvedic about (102).

Khat is a flowering plant native to the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, chewed by locals very much like betel leaves are in South Asia. It is a mild stimulant and moderately addictive.

Orient Line route (from Australia to Colombo to Aden to Port Said and on to Europe)

I was used to the lush chaos of Colombo’s Pettah market, that smell of sarong cloth being unfolded and cut (a throat-catching odour), and mangosteens, and rain-soaked paperbacks in a bookstall (103).

a tropical fruit with a sweet and sour taste

We reached the wharf before the deadline. Out of a too-late courtesy we decided to wait for Mr Daniels on the dock, Ramadhin wrapped up in a djellaba, and Cassius and I hugging ourselves in the brisk air coming from over the ocean (104).
a long loose-fitting unisex outer robe with full sleeves, worn in North Africa and in Arabic-speaking countries along the Mediterranean

‘You should go now,’ she said, and rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

*Broken heart, you*  
*timeless wonder.*

*What a small*  
*place to be (116).*

These are lines from the poem “Echo” by American poet Robert Creeley (1926-2005). The full poem reads:

Broken heart, you  
timeless wonder.

What a small  
place to be.

True, true  
to life, to life.

**Kennels**

_He put down The Bhagavad Gita and walked around the kennels with us, flinging pieces of meat at those who were his favourites (120)._

a 700-verse Hindu scripture in Sanskrit that is part of the Hindu epic Mahabharata

_He stood next to us dressed in a black coat and tie, something he had probably bought in Kundanmals in the Fort for his English sojourn (125-126)._

Kundanmals is clothing store in Colombo.

_Only Mr Fonseka recited something quietly to those beside him. ‘Who hath desired the sea? Her excellent loneliness rather / Than the forecourts of kings.’ He spoke Kipling’s lines in such a way that they sounded grand and wise to us. We were not aware of its irony in the context of Hector de Silva’s life (126)._

The lines are from the 1902 poem “The Sea and the Hills.” The full text is as follows:

Who hath desired the Sea? -- the sight of salt wind-hunted --  
The heave and the halt and the hurl and the crash of the comber win hounded?  
The sleek-barrelled swell before storm, grey, foamless, enormous, and growing --  
Stark calm on the lap of the Line or the crazy-eyed hurricane blowing --  
His Sea in no showing the same his Sea and the same ’neath each showing:  
   His Sea as she slackens or thrills?  
So and no otherwise -- so and no otherwise -- hillmen desire their Hills!
Who hath desired the Sea? -- the immense and contemptuous surges?
The shudder, the stumble, the swerve, as the star-stabbing bow-sprit emerges?
The orderly clouds of the Trades, the ridged, roaring sapphire thereunder --
Unheralded cliff-haunting flaws and the headsail's low-volleying thunder --
His Sea in no wonder the same his Sea and the same through each wonder:
   His Sea as she rages or stills?
So and no otherwise -- so and no otherwise -- hillmen desire their Hills.

Who hath desired the Sea? Her menaces swift as her mercies?
The in-rolling walls of the fog and the silver-winged breeze that disperses?
The unstable mined berg going South and the calvings and groans that declare it --
White water half-guessed overside and the moon breaking timely to bare it --
His Sea as his fathers have dared -- his Sea as his children shall dare it:
   His Sea as she serves him or kills?
So and no otherwise -- so and no otherwise -- hillmen desire their Hills.

Who hath desired the Sea? Her excellent loneliness rather
Than forecourts of kings, and her outermost pits than the streets where men gather
Inland, among dust, under trees -- inland where the slayer may slay him --
Inland, out of reach of her arms, and the bosom whereon he must lay him
His Sea from the first that betrayed -- at the last that shall never betray him:
   His Sea that his being fulfils?
So and no otherwise -- so and no otherwise -- hillmen desire their Hills.

Another teatime lecture was given a few hours later, to prepare us for
the Suez Canal: on de Lesseps, and about the thousands of workers who
died from cholera during its construction, as well as on the Canal’s present
importance as a trade route (126).

Ferdinand de Lesseps (1805-1894):
French diplomat and later developer of the Suez Canal,
which in 1869 joined the Mediterranean and Red Seas,
substantially reducing sailing distances and times between Europe and East Asia

We had crossed open seas at twenty-two knots, and now we moved as if hobbled,
at the speed of a slow bicycle, as if within the gradual unrolling of a scroll
(128).

about 25 mph
Cassius said, 'That is what frankincense smells like' (129).

an incense

I read somewhere that when people first celebrated the distinct point of view of Lartigue's early photographs, it took a while before someone pointed out that it was the natural angle of a small boy with a camera looking up at the adults he was photographing (132).

Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986): French photographer and painter, known for his photographs of automobile races, planes and Parisian fashion female models

Ramadhin's Heart

He brought along a couple of old clubs, a few balls, and they climbed over the gate and wandered on the course, Cassius smoking a joint and lecturing her on the greatness of Nietzsche before he attempted to seduce her on one of the greens (140).

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900): nineteenth-century German iconoclastic philosopher

I am someone who has a cold heart. If I am beside a great grief I throw barriers up so the loss cannot go too deep or too far. There is a wall instantly in place, and it will not fall. Proust has this line: 'We think we no longer love our dead, but … suddenly we catch sight again of an old glove and burst into tears.' I don’t know what it was. There was no glove. He had been dead six days (141).

Marcel Proust (1871-1922): French novelist, critic, and essayist best known for his monumental novel À la recherche du temps perdu, published in seven parts between 1913 and 1927

Two Hearts

If I had read this book, The Upanishads, when I was twenty, I would not have received it. I had a too-busy mind then. But it is a meditation. It helps me now. I suppose I would appreciate her now as well, more easily’ (163).

a collection of texts of religious and philosophical nature, written in India probably between ca. 800 BCE and ca. 500 BCE

Then there was no more talk of Mr Mazappa. Even from her. She kept to herself. Most afternoons I caught a glimpse of her in the shadows of B Deck, in a deckchair. She always had in her possession a copy of The Magic Mountain, but no one ever saw her reading it (169).

a 1924 novel by German writer Thomas Mann (1875-1955); this is an important literary novel, intended as a contrast to the trashy crime novels that Miss Lasqueti actually reads
Asuntha

She went inland and south, living on whatever fruits and vegetables she could find. But she longed for meat. A few times she begged for food at a house and was given *dhāl* (179).

split pulses, in particular lentils

She passed monks with their held-out bowls, and she passed the coconut estates where the guards at the entrances were brought lunch by someone on a bicycle (179).

i.e., Buddhist monks; nearly three-fourths of Sri Lankans are Buddhist

Mr Giggs

He had also told Miss Lasqueti that the seriousness of the crime had governed the level of the accompaniment: Mr Perera was supposedly the very best man from the Colombo CID, and Mr Giggs, though he said so himself, was the best available man from Britain (192).

Criminal Investigation Department

How Old Are You? What Is Your Name?

We felt we had simply committed a heroic gesture. Weren’t the hours we spent spreadeagled in the cyclone equal to that *story where the sinner was blinded on the road to Damascus* (195)?

According to Acts 9, the Pharisee Saul was a great persecutor of Christians in the months after the death of Jesus. On the way to Damascus, however, he was blinded by a vision of Jesus who asked Saul why he had been persecuting him. Continuing his journey to Damascus, Saul regained his sight in the city through the ministrations of Ananias of Damascus, having been instructed by divine revelation to help Saul. Saul then asked to be baptized, converted to Christianity, re-named himself Paul, and went on to become the chief architect of
Christian doctrine in the formative years of the religion (the letters of Paul are the oldest surviving Christian documents).

It was clear to us the Captain was not fond of his Asian cargo. For several nights he performed what he felt was a rollicking piece of verse written by A. P. Herbert, about growing nationalism in the East, that ended:

And all the crows in all the trees
cried 'Banyan for the Banyanese' (195-196)!

A. P. Herbert (1890-1971): English humorist, novelist, playwright and law reform activist

The Tailor

A pianist somewhere on the main level is playing Brahms (200).

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897): important German composer and pianist

One of my ancestors owned seven ships that burned between India and Taprobane (200).

a private island with one villa, located just off the southern coast of Sri Lanka

But then, arriving at the fourth level of the Palace of Ship Owners in Genoa, you find a gathering of Madonnas (200).

Madonna (from the medieval Italian ma donna, meaning “my lady”): a title for Mary, mother of Jesus

Miss Lasqueti wore her pigeon jacket with the ten cushioned pockets, each housing a tumbler or a jacobin, their heads staring out while she strode the decks to give them sea air (205).

breeds of pigeons

Miss Lasqueti: A Second Portrait

RECENTLY I SAT in on a master class given by the filmmaker Luc Dardenne. He spoke of how viewers of his films should not assume they understood everything about the characters. As members of an audience we should never feel ourselves wiser than they; we do not have more knowledge than the characters have about themselves. We should not feel assured or certain about their motives, or look down on them. I believe this. I recognise this as a first principle of art, although I have the suspicion that many would not (208).

Luc Dardenne (born 1954), along with his brother Jean-Pierre Dardenne (born 1951), are Belgian filmmakers, winning the Palme d’Or at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival for their film Rosetta.

As she continues speaking, I make out a scar on the alabaster belly that looks as if it has been drawn or painted by a recent hand. But it is the face that searches
me out, looking openly at me, as if it has no defence. It is like a youthful and less controlled version of Miss Lasqueti, but of course with a wound. The realisation comes to me only now, as I write this, that it may have been a statue of a bodhisattva (210).

In Theravāda Buddhism (the sort of Buddhism practiced in Sri Lanka), a bodhisattva is a being who is bound for enlightenment (this term means something different in Mahāyāna Buddhism).

The revelation that Miss Lasqueti was also ‘a good shot’ was to come much later, with our discovery of a photograph of a young Perinetta Lasqueti, striding away from a perfect target score at the Bisley Trials, laughing with the Polish war hero Juliusz Grusza, who would later represent England in the 50-metre rapid-fire pistol category at the Empire Games (212).

Bisley is the headquarters of the National Rifle Association of the United Kingdom.

    This highly visual piece of information from Miss Lasqueti brought silence to our table. Most passengers were well-read Asia hands who could not quite link their portrait of English life derived from Jane Austen and Agatha Christie with these naked striders (213).

Jane Austen (1775-1817): important English novelist, including Pride and Prejudice, Emma, and Sense and Sensibility; Agatha Christie (1890-1976): English crime novelist, author of such works as Murder on the Orient Express and And Then There Were None

    ‘I am so glad you like tapestries, Mr Mazappa,’ Miss Lasqueti chimed into the new silence that followed this information. Mr Mazappa had said nothing more. Not how many children he had, or their names. ‘I wonder who your tapestry maker was? Perhaps it was a woman, of the Mudéjar tradition. That is, if it was done in the fifteenth century (214).

the name given to individual Moors or Muslims of Al-Andalus who remained in Iberia after the Christian Reconquista but were not converted to Christianity

    It was busy and difficult work at the institute. Paintings and tapestries and sculptures were arriving at a fast rate, all to be catalogued. There was also the work to be done on the re-invention of the gardens, with Mrs Johnson attempting to transform them back into their original Medici structure (218).

The House of Medici was an Italian banking family, political dynasty and later royal house that first began to gather prominence under Cosimo de’ Medici in the Republic of Florence during the first half of the 15th century.

    In Siena, if you go to the corner of the via del Moro and via Sallustio Bandini and look up, you can read Dante’s lines from the Purgatorio –

    ‘That one is’ he replied ‘Provenzan Salvani; and he is here because he had the ambition to carry all of Siena in his hands.’
And at the top of the via Vallerozzi where it meets the via Montanini, you discover, cut into the yellow stone –

Wise Savia I was not, even though Sapìa
I was called, and about the misfortunes of others
I was much happier than about my own good luck (222).

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321): major Italian poet of the late Middle Ages; the lines quoted from *Purgatorio* are about a proud man who must expiate this sin in Purgatory

The weight of his arm, the overall weight of him, my sounds against the sound of my lover, how little light was needed to fall on someone’s shoulder in a painting to suggest grief or concealment, how close that cup of Caravaggio’s rested to the table edge to suggest the tension of failing (224-225).

Caravaggio (1571-1610): Italian painter

He gave me something in the sulphur family, as well as bandages and presses and a liquid antiseptic, something on a par with what had been used in the Crimean War, I suspect, not much better than that (229).

The Crimean War was a military conflict fought between 1853–1856 in which Russia lost to an alliance of France, the British Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and Sardinia.

‘Despair young and never look back,’ an Irishman said (231).

The line is from Irish playwright Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), written in a letter to the young Irish writer Aidan Higgins.

The Breaker’s Yard

We went along the road and then veered onto a narrow lane towards the water. We were going downhill, and she turned onto an even narrower track called Wanless Road. It really didn’t deserve a name. There were four or five cottages overlooking the sea, and she snuggled the car beside one. It looked like a place of solitude, though the nearest neighbour was twenty yards away. Inside, the cottage felt even smaller, but its deck looked out onto water and infinity (245-246).

Based on the description, Emily probably lives on Lasqueti-- a quiet, isolated island off the coast of Vancouver Island. If true, it would be a further implied link between Miss Lasqueti and Emily (Zoon and Hebert 22).

The Key in His Mouth

And then, from this angle and cold perspective, I imagined the two of them, Niemeyer and his daughter, in the dark water – this still-dangerous and to us unforgiven man who would eternally be that: a Magwitch and his daughter – struggling in the water that was rolling with noise, and heaving from the propeller of the ship that had abandoned them there (258).
Abel Magwitch is a fictional character from Charles Dickens’ 1861 novel, *Great Expectations*. In the book, Magwitch is an escaped criminal, hunted by the law.

**Works Cited in the Footnotes**


