

Commentary

MOUNTAINEER AT THE FOOT OF SAGARMATHA

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*(Translated by Mary Des Chene)**

I remembered—it was a mere six months ago, my meeting with Lila Sir. That simple being, that gracious countenance, that gentle smile, that Prometheus of the youth of my life journey—can it be that all these are no more, in any corner of this earth? My daughter's despondent voice echoes unremittingly in my ear—"Pa, I hear Lila Shivakoti passed away."

Fire is life. And in my understanding, Lila Sir's other name is Fire. Warm, bright, life-giving and beautiful fire. That fire now extinguished. And my body gone cold, gone numb.

In that desolate moment, sorrow a blade hacking at my soul, I squatted at the edge of the porch. Harsh sunlight beat down, yet the whole world before my eyes seemed to me pitch black.

When the news came I'd been rushing to leave the house to participate in a literary program. My feet refused to take the road to the program. I phoned and informed them—I wasn't well. I wouldn't be coming to speak.

And then, drawing that debilitating pain into my grief-stricken mind I sat long, just staring, eyes lost in the void. Mind pitch black. And so too, the outer world that the eyes see.

Lila Shivakoti, the so-beloved village teacher of my youth. Home Sangarumma, Ilam. Of middling stature. Sitting on the edge of the porch, with suffering mind I'm remembering Lila Sir. A joyous wave of insistent memory keeps surging up in my anguish-laden mind—Lila Sir in his pure white *deudi suruwal* and dazzling white tunic, shiny black cap perched on his head, neat white Bata Company shoes on his feet. Trim and fit. Lila Sir. As if stealing fire from the palace of the wicked Zeus he had come; had come spreading warmth and light in my dark, chill village.

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Lila Sir. Turning the mind's eye toward the far distant past I now see: my eventless village, a remote settlement on a steep precipice, like a vast lake—algae choked, stagnant, motionless, colorless and dark. From beyond the seven hills in the guise of Lila Shivakoti comes a Prometheus. In his hand a flaming stone—a stone filled with the warmth of modern knowledge, a stone filled with scientific awareness, a stone that conceals the seeds of consciousness. Courageously, he throws the stone into the lake. Innumerable waves swell. I reflect—I, who now sit sorrowfully on the porch remembering my own beloved Prometheus, am one among those waves.

That Lila Sir is now no more in this world.

In my mind, crushed by the weight of gratitude, a feeling arose—I have certain obligations toward Lila Sir. To fulfill them I must write something in his memory. But whom to write for? In today's world, rife with devotees of capital, what significance has a simple, gentle, creative person? Who has interest in hearing them discussed? In the superficial press there is endless condemnation of the national thieves of the national swinery, fattened on the votes of the people. In the end, even if only by way of condemnation, it is they who remain under discussion. There is uninterrupted condemnation of the parliamentarians and ministers standing in the soul-selling queue. And, by means of condemnation, it is discussion of them alone that goes on. And then there's discussion of the robbers of the Letter of Credit scandal and the Fertilizer Scandal... And again, discussion of the traitors to the people, with their mansions made of looted wealth, sitting in state in their appropriated Pajero jeeps. And discussion of the national Bhasmasurs of the Mahakali Scandal. And then discussion of the beauty pageant Shylocks who spread the poisonous germs of disfigured sex. Everywhere place and value is given to discussion of destroyers of the natural and human environments. In the end, who has need of discussion of the simple, strong, healthy, creative, compassionate and beautiful things? In the end, what profit, what unparalleled attraction could there be in discussion of such a one as Lila Sir, silently taking leave of the earth's courtyard after silently fulfilling his human duties?

With the desire to unburden my mind I tried to write a poem in remembrance of Lila Sir. The old man's personality was simple and beautiful. The poem written in his memory made it complex and ugly. That ugly poem seemed to me like a gross insult to a beautiful thing. I tore it up and threw it away.

Finally, consoling myself, I sought to hide away in a secluded corner of my own mind: Navin Rai, the main hero of my story 'Samgram

Bahadur Sarki' is a symbolic word portrait of Lila Sir. Perhaps there's a little color added here and there, perhaps a little polish is applied. But the main elements are the same—Navin Rai is Lila Shivakoti. Good enough. That in itself is my memorial bouquet to Lila Sir—'Samgram Bahadur Sarki'.

The lazy days of Gorkhe democracy, imbued with Bihari-style corruption, kept crawling along with their own bitter, inexorably slow motion. The fresh image of Lila Sir refused to recede from my memory. Finally, feeling very sentimental, I came to a decision—I shall leave behind, in writing, some things about Lila Sir. Perhaps in the end there are some simple and appreciative people in this world of Gorkhe Shylock tyranny. If so perhaps they'll give it a read; if not then a few more meaningless pages will be added to the heap wasted in the name of today's publishing industry. Enough said.

* * * *

The year is 1956. In the village of Subhang in the district of Panchthar, the corner posts of the school are already dug in, and a wall-less hut has been erected. In the hut recitation of foolish Kalidasa's 'Ka' and my uncle's meaningless 'A' had begun some days ago. Meantime, Lila Sir of Sangarumma, Ilam arrived. Calf-tight pure white *deudi suruwal*, dazzling white tunic, slick black cap, glittering white Bata Company shoes, fit body beneath wheaten countenance—as if this were no ordinary man; in that guise an enticing, fragrant flower blossom had come dancing into our village. As if some unprecedented messenger of the gods from some mystery world had alit as a halo of light in the murky environs of our village. Along with Lila Shivakoti modern knowledge came into our village, glittering science came into our village. New learning to open the floodgates of curiosity came into our village; the first lesson in English—the language that stitches connecting threads to the vast outer world—came into our village.

Together with the advent of Lila Sir, novel activities commenced in the school. The walls of the school building began to be raised. A donation-collecting song was composed. It may have been composed by my Nepali-Sanskrit guru, Pandit Teknath Gautam. I still remember, it was a song that might have placed first in the obsequious praise-song competition through the whole of South Asia. The gist of it was this:

Respected Donor Sir,
Your exalted self is Brahma

Your exalted self is Vishnu
Your exalted self is also Mahesh
May your offering
Make your earthly world a fortune-filled one
And your afterworld a better one
May your offering
Given with heart-felt generosity
Illuminate this dark world

From the village to beyond the seven hills a donation-raising journey took place. To build the school building, make furniture, make a playing field, add a few *paisa* to the master's monthly salary. There was a magical attraction to Lila Sir's personality. People were eager to throng around him. As if that master from beyond the seven hills were a halo of light. As if to be able to stand by his side meant, by borrowing a little light, to be oneself illuminated. Singing the glories of schooling and joining his hands in greeting, he roamed from house to house. Out of respect for his word, people came to give help, according to their means, in the building of the school.

Before Lila Sir my uncle was the master in the hut. A veteran of the Burma battles of World War II, the old fellow was a strange creature. Renowned in phys-ed and a master in ganja smoking. He taught us ABCD. After ABCD he began to teach an English book. But the teaching was wondrously odd. Without giving a clue to their meaning, he taught by rapidly repeating the words and sentences of the English book. "Perhaps next year I'll tell you the meaning," he would promise. When next year came he would again say, "next year". His next year of revealing the meaning of English words never came. And the students began to ridicule the old man—"if he knew he'd tell the meaning, the useless old fool." But he had his own method for enthusing the students. If some fellow warrior from the Burma battles came by the school, the two of them would raise clouds of ganja smoke to their heart's content. And then, in pothead fashion, the old man would send us up from one class to the next. Thus promoted along, I had already been sent into class nine at the age of ten. What went wrong with his arrangement, I don't know. But after quitting teaching, Uncle again migrated to Muglan. When Lila Sir came he sent me down from class nine to class three. And it seemed to me that uncle's "Burmese education" had bitten the dust.

The old school hut was torn down and on that land a new building began to be raised. For some months our classes went on outside under

the blue skies. In the cold weather on the warm grass, in the hot weather in the shade of the Bar Pipal tree. The teaching of those days may have been even heavier than that of today. It was in those classes that the old man began to teach me all branches of study. Geometry, algebra, arithmetic, geography, history... The first two kinds of math I found to be a tedious burden, having neither rhyme nor reason. Not a hint emerged from Sir's mouth as to what their utility in life might be. Thinking back, I'd now hazard a guess that the old man meaninglessly recited geometry and algebra and it was just as meaninglessly recited back. I found this parroting a little mysterious and extremely boring: with furious effort, parching your throat, parrot all year long; in the exam vomit it raw and pretend you have passed.

But geography and history were another matter. I greatly liked geography instruction, and history too. Lila Sir's way of teaching was extremely flexible and engaging, adapted to the weather. It was not his way always to follow the pages of a book. Say there were clouds in the sky—he would begin to reveal the significance of clouds gathering. Say there was a rumble of thunder—he would begin to tell of the three stages of thunder formation. And just the same for strong sunlight, monsoon, hail, frost, dew, rainbows and so on. Between the stone walls of the resting spot around the Bar Pipal tree there was a great flat shiny black rock inscribed with a memorial to the ancestors of its builders. That was the blackboard of the school's early days. Taking stone chalk in his hand, Lila Sir stands and, drawing a picture on the rock, begins to recount the changing scenes of nature and the details of the processes of transformation. That open classroom is like an open people's school. The audience there is not only the school's regular students. The shepherds surreptitiously show up there, fieldhands come and squat, passers-by come and stand, even housewives carrying water vessels on their hips snatch chances to listen to a few sentences.

Before the coming of Lila Sir, the god Indra would send rain directly from heaven into our village. Sometimes, failing to give timely rain, stingy Indra would produce the calamity of drought and make people grovel for the sake of the monsoon—in the name of worship to the gods he would consume a bribe of male and female goats. Sometimes, pouring down an unneeded stream of water, he would send a deluge of floods and landslides. But along with the teachings of geography brought by Lila Sir, the god Indra began to be overpowered, and now in our village the weather began to change according to the coordination and conflict of nature's transformative powers. Now and then, while taking the school

path on their way somewhere, the Bahun *mukhiya* and Limbu *subba*—overlords of the village—and the priests too, perched for a moment on the fence and chanced to hear the geography lesson. I would now guess that when they saw doubt beginning to be cast upon the existence of their own world-creating, world-moving, world-maintaining gods and goddesses they must have careened over a waterfall. Furrowing their eyebrows, looking at Lila Sir with eyes filled with veiled hatred and contempt, they would go on their way.

Among all the teachings, it was geography that I found most savory—strange and wondrous. Lila Sir's geography did not rely on gods to function; it operated according to the laws of the forces of this world. Lila Sir knew the reason for every change occurring in nature. And then too, such pleasure the old man would take in revealing and explaining! As if he was becoming enthused by the sound of his own voice, becoming joyful. The young boy that I was wondered, 'Could it be that all-knowing Lila Sir himself is a god?'

Before the coming of Lila Sir, the earth of our village was still and lazy. Lying somewhere beneath in the underworld, a great serpent supported our earth. Riding in a twenty-horse chariot the sun was eternally circling around our lazy earth. Lila Sir came and everything turned upside-down. He arrested the sun in space and, rounding the flat earth, set it to circling continuously round the sun. Before, so long as it was still, the earth of our village was flat. Below our flat earth was the demon world which in the alms-begging language of the priests was called 'hell'. After they died the poor and destitute who had not the means to give all the priests demanded in offerings would fall into that very hell and, for the sins of their previous life, would suffer terrible torture. Now our earth hung in the empty sky and hell disappeared. Overnight an out-and-out miracle transpired. The sun-drawing horses, snapping their reins, wandered off to graze in some pasture, and the serpents of the earth's bowels disappeared in fear of Lila Sir.

To show the minute form of the earth, Lila Sir brought a globe into the school. On it was shown which countries and continents are located where. That tiny earth called a globe awoke a terrifying horror in my mind: how *were* those toward the bottom of the earth, that is the people of Australia, New Zealand and so on, standing? My dull-witted mind made a guess—when standing their feet are above, their heads below. Reflecting on this, I would begin to feel dizzy; shocks ran through my body. In the world of my imagination those unfortunates in the bottom half of the world would begin to fall toward the void. Falling eternally through the

endless void how dizzy would they feel, how desolate would they be? In what region of space, where and how would they be struck, breathing their last? This supremely agonizing question pursued me for a long time thereafter like my own shadow. And sometimes, while standing or walking, a romantic fantasy would come over me—I would get the sneaking feeling that, as the revolving earth of my village spun along, a collision somewhere had brought about a great agitation. And then, in fear of falling, if some support was at hand I would rush to clutch onto it; if there was none I would tread the ground with extremely firm footsteps. Usually the fear stayed with me that some day as the earth spun on, ending up on the lower part of the earth our village would fall off into the void somewhere...! Or, snapping that rope called gravitation, the earth of our village would collapse into the endless void...!

My geography was for me a bagful of fantastic inventions. It had its own sensational stories. It also held its own terrors.

After geography, my favorite subject was history. My history lessons told how the little king of Gorkha, Prithvinarayan, wanted to make himself king of a vast territory by expanding his state. Taking an armed force with him, the hot-tempered Prithvinarayan of my lessons set out on a battle campaign. He strode along traversing hill and dale. With eyes colored by the mind's infinite curiosity, I'm watching: he stays in a cave somewhere, hides somewhere in a jungle. He's very clever, the little king. Somewhere in the course of the wars he plays a trick and captures another kingdom, somewhere a net of deceit is spread and he very cleverly sneaks a retreat in a life-saving campaign. His insuppressible grand ambitions, his tireless courage, strikingly skillful maneuvering, his endless campaign—I find all these romantic, sensational and like a colorful sporting spectacle. It's as if, roaming and whistling over hill and dale, energizing his own army boys, he's marching across the interior of my own curious mind. Conquering the whole world, Gorkhe Prithvinarayan arrives in Kirtipur in the valley of Nepal. Having tasted defeat again and again, after finally capturing Kirtipur my Gorkhe history hero goes wild with the fanaticism of victory, is intoxicated with the evil sentiment of revenge. And, slicing off the noses of the defeated Kirtipureans, he fills seventeen baskets.

After Prithvinarayan's romantic journey of conquest reaches Kirtipur countless thorns sprout in my tender mind. The feeling of respect toward him that his valor had awoken in my mind turns into a bottomless pool of hatred. And I see: throughout the whole course of his warrior's journey, spilling from the noses of innocent people, an unstoppable stream of

blood is flowing. In the stumps of Kirtipur's bloody noses, I read for the first time the terrible story of the cruelty of king-emperors. At this point my insatiable curiosity about history turns into a kind of repulsion. Nevertheless, sometimes with enthusiasm, sometimes with disgust, I keep on reading history, reading on and on...

Lila Sir roams from house to house introducing himself, instructing and exhorting that sons and daughters should be sent to school, and requesting help in the raising of the school building. Wherever he goes, he receives a warm-hearted welcome. It's evening time. Now Lila Sir has come to our house. The old man sits on a goat-hair blanket atop a cot on the porch. The custom of using sugar has still not found purchase in the village. Up above on the verandah arrangements to come up with some honey are hurriedly being put into effect in order to proffer sweet tea to the master. Lila Sir is talking with Pa about the significance of female education. Leaning against the left-hand corner of the house in a furtive pose, I'm eavesdropping. Lila Sir puts forth the example of some woman who, as a nurse, cared for the wounded. He adds that a woman discovered the remedy for a deadly disease. I hear him give these same illuminating examples time and again to get people enthused about the idea that daughters should be sent to study. As I grew and continued to read, later I realized that the brilliant women the old man had discussed in the village were none other than Florence Nightingale and Madam Curie. And remembering his choice of illuminating examples, the respect for him in my mind grew yet deeper. Nowadays developers who are adherents of the NGO path speak of schooling for uneducated women in terms of "empowerment" and untold high sounding mysterious "-ization" words. But what happened back then, without any intoning of complexly defined words? I realize that in my village by around 1957 Lila Sir had already sown the seeds of a practical campaign for female empowerment.

I remember the great effort Lila Sir made to attract toward letters the unfortunates called 'untouchables' who were treated like animals. There weren't many untouchable households in the village. Even from among those, to find boys who came to the school was like searching for gleanings in the fields. Of those few, the name of one who came to school for a long time was Samgram Bahadur Sarki. It was Lila Sir himself who gave him that name. The name of the boy who came to the school was Singane Sarki. Lila Sir made him over into Samgram Bahadur Sarki. I imagine that there would have been symbolic meaning to that name in the mind of Lila Sir, who was empathetic toward *dalits*. Its sense is that in order to render touchable and human those humiliated as

untouchable and inhuman, battle must be done. Thus Snot-Nose Sarki's new name—Battle Brave Sarki...

As I write these lines now, with the ink of reverence and sorrow, two portraits sparkle with vivid clarity on the inner pages of my mind. One is Lila Sir, the other Samgram Bahadur Sarki. The sons and daughters of Bahun overlords and *subbas* sat atop benches. Samgrame sat on a jute sack in the dust to the left of Lila Sir's chair. I see Samgrame's sleeves, stiff with dried snot. Covered with muck and snot, his hands are disgusting. But Lila Sir doesn't know disgust. Grasping Samgrame's hand, he teaches him to write Kapuri 'Ka' on a huge wooden board. My mind, deeply imprinted with the ethos of the Bahun overlords, makes a silent protest - '*Baaphre!* so exalted and such a spotless man stoops all the way down to so low and such a filthy one.' But remembering that scene, now my mind accepts it with profound respect—with what vivid clarity the vastness of Lila Sir's soul shone in that act of stooping. Later Samgrame was promoted from his low jute sack up onto the benches. This promotion was full of pain and struggle. Promoting a Sarki's son to an equal place on the benches with the sons of the Bahun overlords and *subbas* raised a wave of unrest, wrath and opposition among some members of the so-called high castes. Between Lila Sir and the big bosses a hidden form of confrontation ensued. It smoldered beneath the ash. In an effort to stoke that fire with the aid of the instruments of story-telling, in my story that conflagration was transformed into a reflection of Samgram Bahadur Sarki.

As I've already said, in the wake of Lila Sir's arrival, all kinds of novel things came into our village. New sports options came into the village. A new door to social interaction opened. New entertainment activities entered. And then new attire, new sundries, new goings-on... A shop opened near the school. People had long smoked tobacco rolled in corn husks or *angeri* leaves. Now, grabbing onto the school's tail, bidis arrived. Except for the houses of one or two *mukhiya*, people had long boiled bark of the Khayar tree, extracting a bit of color, and drunk 'Khayar tea'. Those without means drank straight Khayar tea, those with the means drank it with milk. Now, into the village's own shop came tealeaf, came sugar, came peppercorn. There had long been a custom of cutting off leggings in which the knees were rent, and wearing short *suruwal*. Now the relatively well-off boys who came to the school began to wear "half-pants". In these ways, hiding and insinuating itself into thought, into repast, into attire, into music and dance, into entertainment and sports, devious capitalism, striking most alluring poses, pierced our village.

And drama came into our village. The choice was Lila Sir's, and the direction also his. Bhimnidhi Tiwari's play *Sahanshila Sushila* was staged on the grass by the school. For the village that first play was an unimaginable wonder, a joyous occasion. I played the part of Sete. Sete was a ruffian-type joker. The joker role made me famous throughout the village. Some called me 'Sete' with respect, others ridiculed me. It may have been then that Lila Sir changed my name. According to the choice of Lila Sir, Singane Sarki became Samgrame Sarki. And, from Khilraj, I became Khagendra Raj.

After Lila Sir set foot in our village Tihar was richer and more festive. New color was added to the excitement of the festival. When Tihar comes, *deusi* is played from the school with great gusto. In the village all the costumes, musical instruments and other accouterments for performing *deusi* were new. New dazzling, glittery saris, wigs and mustaches, clown noses that seemed like they'd make us die laughing, other masks of the same sort, and then—a harmonium, and a brass flute, and cymbals too, and more... And, shining in the night like a dwarf sun, a brilliant kerosene lantern.

When Tihar comes, the influence of the school spreads a new splendor in the village. Several thousands are collected for the school; for the villagers there is totally absorbing entertainment. In the eyes of the villagers, Lila Sir's dance forms the number one wonder of the whole world. In the village females, especially unmarried girls, occasionally dance—during the final session of Purana recitations, during the Tij festival honoring husbands, or in the *ratyauli* while the men are away fetching a new bride. Men don't dance. As a traditional caste occupation, Darjis dance during wedding festivities. Otherwise, no one dances—caste would be lost. For the so-called high castes to dance means to fall to low caste. But during the *deusi* minstrelling Lila Sir, wearing a broad-brimmed army topi, dances spectacularly in a flailing style. People are astonished—a master of such stature openly dances *deusi* in the face of the world, laughingly dances. Moreover, it's no ordinary dance, it's a type one watches unblinkingly. Now I reflect—feudalism bows before the sharp sword of capitalism. Lila Sir does not lose caste.

In the village, for sports there was *dandibiyo* or there was *gudughutta* (the game known these days in towns and cities as *kapardi*). The great pleasure was that, dribbled in by the foot of Lila Sir, a new game came into the village—the irresistible-to-kick football. It was not only the school's game; it became the common game throughout the village. A means of easing the heart and stretching the limbs, an arranger of social

get-togethers and interaction, a footbridge shortening the emotional distance between the older and younger generations—the football of our village. Our school was situated in the middle of the steep escarpment to which the village clung. At the summit of the hill above the school there was a pair of ponds. Beside the two ponds was a very long stone-shaped grassy area—just perfect for playing football. Sometimes a few times a month, sometimes once in a few months, raising the village, we'd go to the twin ponds to play football. In the players' ranks there would, of course, be the boys clad in half-pants; old men over sixty with three sandalwood paste lines on their foreheads would also be there. Bringing to mind the football episodes of that era makes me laugh even now—hooking their sacred threads up over their ears the old Shaivite men would piss in the stand of ferns and then, coming onto the playing field they'd boot the football with loafers of untanned leather. Then, plopping like toads onto the grass, they'd laugh themselves silly.

I remember how, along with Lila Sir, came the day of reckoning for many of the village topknots. One after another the tips of the poor unfortunate Hinduism-preserving topknots fell under the knife. It may have been just about a year to the day after Lila Sir came that the topknot-terror picked upon our school. Only the guru was in the school that day. The third eldest of my brothers, Krishna Kumar, was a somewhat mischievous sort. He was slow in his studies but quick as a whip in sports and other outside activities. The bell ending the mid-day break sounded. My brother Krishna and some other boys were not to be found. Even after the sixth bell had sounded their faces were not to be seen. Finally they popped up, but in a new form. The guru's hawk-like hunter's eyes saw right away—the truant boys had come back with their hair in a fashionable Bengali cut, short in back, bangs in the front, cut by the hand of some Gurkha. That does it—that prisoner of tradition, holder of Hinduism's glory, is done for. When he saw that evil deed of the irreligious, the fire ignited by Brahma's fury began to burn in the universe of our fanatically devout guru. Grabbing his wrist in contempt, foaming at the mouth, stomping his untanned leather loafer-clad feet as he stormed from this corner of the school to that, he began to roar on behalf of the topknot. Panditji stroked his warrior's mustache with hatred, shot daggers from eyes prostrate with humiliation, as if it were not the boys' but his very own sacred topknot that had today undergone its virgin cutting. Seeing his furious form my stomach flip-flopped nauseatingly: 'Here it comes. Today Guru is going to smash these brothers' ribs to powder'.

Due to the topknot-terror, the final period was completely disrupted. Right in the middle of school the guru left, heading straight for our house. Finding Pa at home the guru, heart aching, laid before him a harsh case regarding the Topknot Scandal. Singing the glories of the Hindu scriptures, he said: "taking copper and sacred basil, their purification ceremony must be done. Are we to allow the Age of Destruction to rear its head in this way in these times?" He went on to cast ample light on the religious importance of the topknot. And in conclusion he declared: "Even if their hair is shaved, a topknot must be fashioned out of what remains." Pa listened silently to the guru's outpouring. He didn't say yes, nor did he say no.

Out of their wits after hearing the guru's thunderous roar, the topknot-cutters had gone underground somewhere.

The guru set off down the path. And in a little while, as if popping up out of nowhere, Lila Sir unexpectedly arrived. Perhaps it was in order to avert the ill effects that might ensue that he came puffing up, having gotten wind somewhere of the topknot-terror at the school. As soon as he arrived Pa told Sir about the guru's whining. Smiling, Lila Sir said, "The guru speaks rightly. But Father, would my purification ceremony not have to be done first? Mine is the short Bengali cut. I've taken meals, along with this head, at the hearths of most of the pure Hindu Brahmans of the village. Therefore Father, might not it be necessary to first perform the collective purification ceremony of all those Brahmans?" Hearing the considered words of witty Lila Sir, my father radiated agreement. And then from the mouths of those two fast friends, close as a pair of tongs, burst a great gale of laughter. A joyful kind of unfettered laughter it was.

After that it was just like a competition in Bengali-style cutting that went on among all the big boys of the school. The sacred topknots preserved with such care for age upon age were being cleaned right out. With even boys not studying in school emulating the new fashion, the Bengali cut effected the mass murder of the topknots. What was seen on some of them was not actually a Bengali cut though, but a Gorkhe-stamped mixed cut. Look from behind—it's a Bengali cut. Look from above—the topknot's luxuriant growth is just as before.

It was Saturday. On the previous day Lila Sir had said, "Tomorrow you and I will bathe and do washing together, alright?" My mouth didn't want to say it's not alright. Neither though, was it easy to say alright. For one thing, I had to work at home on the holiday—to cut grass, graze the livestock or do the agricultural work of the season. The next thing was, yoked together with Lila Sir what was I to wash? What's more,

clothes' washing is none of my work, it's mother's, it's that of sisters-in-law. I recounted Sir's words to my pa; he said, "alright, go." But in my mind reluctance remained. I know from the good scent wafting from Lila Sir that he bathes and washes with soap. And me? Among us there's no custom of using soap, it's beyond our means. Clothes are washed by long boiling with ash. Otherwise they're washed with *kalchyunda* seed or foam extracted from pounded *siundi*.

In the end I had to give the old man company. Carrying a *kamij-suruwal* set and a little *kalchyunda* seed in my hands, I arrived at the huge stone water spout near the school. He took me into the solitary ravine where there were delightful big flat slippery rocks. Drying clothes was easy; after bathing and washing it was comfortable for relaxing too.

"Today you'll wash your clothes with my soap."

I started to wash the clothes. In the way that children greedily lick a sweet for fear that it will soon be finished, I began to profusely—very profusely—apply soap to the clothes. Perhaps seeing my movements, Lila Sir smiled. And then rubbing and beating away, he applied soap. I'm pounding the sloshing clothes, *gajajja-gajajja*, soap foam is coming. As much as I pound, that much more foam comes. The stream is already completely white; the foam hasn't quit increasing. My greedy mind said, 'Babu! The soap's wasted. That much foam might have washed a whole heap of clothes!' I filled my cupped hands with foam—'my lord! How glittering, how soft, how intoxicating!' Such precious foam was now flowing uselessly all down the stream.

The old man had gone down into the ravine to relieve himself. I looked around: his sandals were right there. I felt tempted to put my feet in the sandals. But what if the old man came along just then? What if he saw from somewhere? Even while I was of two minds, my feet stretched toward the sandals like iron drawn to a magnet. Wearing the sandals gave me a fantastic romantic feeling. How soft, how supple, how silken, how restful! A wondrous tingling entered the soles of my feet. And then I felt like taking a few steps. With sandalled steps I made it to the algae-covered rocks; immediately the sandals slipped. Like a toad I plopped into the water and the thong of the right sandal snapped. The sandal went and with it all my wits. 'Oh god, today I'm sunk. Where shall I flee, where can I hide?' In that desperate moment of mental panic Lila Sir appeared standing right in front of me. I cowered like a snake covered by the shadow of a griffin.

"What happened, little one?"

My terror-filled eyes are riveted on the wounded sandal.

"Did the sandal snap?"

Unable to look at Sir's face, my mouth went dry with fear.

"It's nothing". He laid his hand on my shoulder. That touch of the hand was filled with unlimited empathy and love. After finishing bathing and washing we sat a long long time basking in the sun's warmth on the flat slippery rocks.

"After studying what will you be?"

I had no answer—what will I be. I know nothing about what a person may be after how much studying of what. I only know this, in the world the greatest person of all is a master, a master just like Lila Sir. Clad in *deudi suruwal* shaped tight to the calf, wearing white Bata shoes, neat and clean, smiling, active, versed in knowledge from the four corners of the earth, respected by everyone, raising a warning finger to the god Indra's rainmaking—a master like Lila Sir. For me, life's first and final cherished ideal was he and he alone—Lila Sir, my beloved Prometheus.

In the school Lila Sir was omnipresent all day long. There were always far too few masters to see to the number of classes. The guru would sometimes come to the school, sometimes he'd rush here and there performing memorial and other tradition-perpetuating rites by rote. The days when the guru was absent Lila Sir would take all the classes by himself. Getting this class wrapped up in some work he'd run off toward the next class. He'd get that class wrapped up in some work and then stride toward yet another class. In this way, as he ran hither and thither till exhausted, his difficult day would pass. Once in awhile, as an emergency substitute, he would order me off to teach the lower grades.

Thus I too became a master.

This occasional mastership elevated me in everyone's eyes. I remember now—Lila Sir's affection, the occasional mastership, the brainpower to be always first in the class—all these things began to nurture in me a bit of an arrogant nature. Kudos in the schoolroom, at home, in the neighborhood, kudos all around, teacher's special favorite, Pa's special favorite—I puffed up, on the way to arrogance. And the feeling that 'I'm the one', raised its head in me. The cultural sensibility so entwined with character, born of that environment when I was small, may have left a chronic imprint. Sometimes I myself find the arrogance, stubbornness and lack of tolerance that come shining forth in me so unlikeable, so depressing. And I feel that this sensibility, already rooted in me, will perhaps have its end only with my own end.

There constantly recurs in my mind the remorseful memory of a great mistake I made at school one day right in front of Lila Sir's nose, due to

this arrogance of mine, this intolerance. When that memory comes, so too does realization of Lila Sir's greatness. We were playing football. Slipping in the mud I fell very hard. Without thinking I jumped to the conclusion that young Uprety of the lower class had tripped me and so I had fallen. I was blind with anger. Jumping up I gave young Uprety a punch in the chest. He staggered backward and, unable to regain his balance, fell flat. Clutching at his chest with both hands he wailed at the top of his lungs. The whole school gathered around him. Young Uprety is crying away; I'm standing around dumbfounded on the edge of the crowd. To tell on me to my father and see to it that I'd be beaten to a quick, crying he headed off up the path carrying his school bag.

Commotion swept through the school. Amid the unwanted hullabaloo school was dismissed early that day.

Silent, drooping, I remained standing right there.

Everyone had already gone. And then Lila Sir called me into the upstairs office. I didn't go. Grasping my hand he led me up. In one corner of my mind was remorse, in another fear. My terrorized mind reasons—'today I'm going to be beaten to a pulp'. After entering the office Lila Sir slammed the door. He sat in his usual chair and gestured for me to sit in the chair facing. That behavior of his I found strange, highly dramatic. How could I—travesty committing arrested criminal—be worthy of sitting in a chair occupied by masters? He got up and sat me down in the chair. Seeing that conduct of his, my heart really melted; guilty consciousness of criminality gripped me all the more. Overcome, burying my face in my hands I began to sob. Lila Sir's expression is weary, pained. I sneak a peek: not a trace of anything like fury there.

"You cut your own nose today. And you cut mine too."

Suffocating remorse filled my chest. I began to cry with abandon.

"Fine, cry to your heart's content". In despondent tones he said, "cleanse your soiled heart with your tears."

After I've been crying for some time, with another sneaking peek I try to read the mood of Lila Sir's face. There's uneasiness there; nothing like fury, not a whit. At last, gripping me by the arm he led me to the water spout and set me to rinsing away the tracks of my tears. After rinsing away the tears I sat on a rock near the stone water spout. He left me there, heading uphill toward the path to our house.

Only after deep twilight had fallen did I reach home. I found Lila Sir there conversing with Pa in hushed tones. 'What will Pa say to me today, what may he do?' At the moment of arrival the panic and unease in my heart increased. Turning a furious eye Pa glanced at me and, evincing no

interest, turned his head away again. Unable to muster the courage to enter the house, I stood leaning against its right-hand corner.

"Come here". Lila Sir called me over. And, stroking my cheeks with both hands he said, "Never forget this great mistake and you will be a good person." My soul melted. Lila Sir is gripping my arm—with affection, with love, with a blessing-bestowing pure feeling. I'm standing, silently, head hanging.

At that moment I felt: Lila Shivakoti is the best person in the world. The best of all, most knowing of all, most understanding of all...

As life carried on, Lila Sir's days of woe arrived. Unwanted remembrances of those days—invisible soul-snipping scissors all—are plentiful in my memory. Classes grew and the need for more masters sharpened. I was in class seven. Another master from Ilam was added—Ganga Upreti. Ganga Upreti had taken the SLC exam. The results weren't out yet. Lila Sir, the old master, foundation layer and raiser of the school; Ganga Upreti, novice master, but with more schooling. Lila Sir, passer of the ninth grade; Ganga Upreti, taker of the tenth grade's iron SLC examination. Now who will be headmaster? A whirlpool of competition and conflict arose. Such as to be unseen from the outside, but internally in fierce form. Some of the bigwigs of the village who bore the mark of the *mukhiya* wanted to make Ganga Sir headmaster, most of the simple souls were of a mind to keep Lila Sir as headmaster. Lila Sir's popularity was very strong. His headmastership persisted. But Ganga Sir did not let him rest easy for a moment. Only Ganga Sir knows whether it's true or not that he spread a new rumor in the village. The word was that he said, "Lila Sir has passed through only class seven." Lila Sir's monthly salary was ninety rupees. Those who didn't want him whispered that a man of little ability had lied to consume a big salary. In Lila Sir's face, always bright and gracious, always lively, always fresh looking, now a feeling of irritation appeared, despondency appeared, weariness appeared. I found that transformation supremely painful.

Ganga Sir's results came out. He got a Gaandhi division pass. Though he had passed at the lowest level his pretentiousness became unbearable. With such insulting pretense he declared, "Respected Lila, I managed to pass." The inner sense was, 'I'm a pass; you're not.' I think to myself that he took the chance amply to express his jealousy over not getting to be headmaster. I see that Lila Sir is despondent. As if Ganga Sir's Gaandhi division has swept away the authority of his headmastership, has discredited him. In the evening Lila Sir came to stay at our house. A most secretive discussion went on between him and Pa. Hearing a snatch of the

discussion I got a hint: Lila Sir is, reluctantly, quitting the school and taking to the road, and my pa is pleading with him not to do it. After long conversation he pulled a carefully folded paper out of his cloth bag. It was a thing preserved with extreme care, like a pearl. What could it be? Unquenchable curiosity arose in my mind. Lila Sir went about removing the outer paper; like a greedy child seeing a packet of sweets, I stretched my neck to look. It was his certificate. He held it out toward Pa. It was in English. Pa set me to reading it. Haltingly, I read. It was concrete evidence of having passed ninth grade. When he understood the crux of the matter Pa was overwhelmed, furious. Tears welled up spontaneously in the corners of Lila Sir's eyes. For a long time a profound silence reigned.

Day by day Ganga Sir's exuberance increased; day by day Lila Sir's kept diminishing. As before, the center of the tug-of-war was that same headmastership, that same authority. Gradually lethargy came into the teaching at the school. The masters don't arrive on time. In the instruction too, there's not the same intensity as before. Ganga Sir doesn't seem particularly sharp in ability, nevertheless in showing off he is unmatched. He sings wherever and whenever he pleases, in a crooning voice. The conceit that 'I'm the one' is obvious in him. As if by climbing the stairs of Gaandhi Division he has already scaled Sagarmatha.

The school became for me like a deeply depressing lightless cavern.

My beloved Prometheus is pained, as if defeated.

All the anguish of defeat accumulates in my soul. In that moment, fury and remorse burning my innards, I reflect: If he had the chance Lila Sir might happily teach Ganga Sir for many years. But Ganga Sir carries a Gaandhi Division certificate. What point have ability, contributions and honesty before a government certificate?

What conflict went on internally I don't know. Externally, Ganga Sir went on acting petulantly; his haste to capture the headmaster's chair remained unabated. But just a few days later, toting all his bags and belongings, Ganga Sir warmed the road to Ilam.

The claimant to the chair was gone. The tension-filled atmosphere of the school became somewhat more peaceful.

Tihar came. The school's preparations for playing *deusi* at Tihar commenced with the usual gusto. This time there was a dream of collecting a big purse by performing *deusi* from one side of the hills to the other. And then to buy a new harmonium, a new patromax lantern, new things for dance and drama... But sad to say, the disaster brought on by *deusi* ruined everything. As always a plan was made to begin *deusi* from the big house of the senior *mukhiya*. 'Grand house; grand action', as

the saying goes. If big earnings can be taken in hand from the big houses, the small houses may more or less follow suit, and the desired purse may be raised. The *deusi* players arrived in the large courtyard of the big-house *mukhiya*. And, within five minutes of arrival, a pitched battle sprang up. The *mukhiya* was a religious fanatic and number one in conceit too. Why it was so, only he knows, but on that day his mood was off. As the school *deusi* stepped into his courtyard, as if trying to chase away a beggar by giving a copper, he tossed a five rupee note down onto the courtyard. The *deusi* players had held out hope for fifty or a hundred rupees. Even if the earnings proved small, at the least they had not held hopes of receiving an insult.

My second eldest brother, Vishnu Kumar, clad in a loincloth, his cheeks reddened, was Hanuman. It was Hanuman's role, brandishing his staff around the heads of small-givers, to increase the earnings. Hanuman commenced with his act—he raised the huge staff above the *mukhiya's* head. It was excuse enough to give them a mouthful: the *mukhiya* became instantly mad with rage. In the most arrogant tones, he said unspeakable things. It seemed that the revengeful pus festering from all the blows, all the wounds that had been dealt to his authority from the day Lila Sir had stepped into the school till now, would flow from his mouth today. The blow of the infidel language entering the village, the wound inflicted during the mass murder of the sacred topknots, the insulting blow of placing Sarkis shoulder to shoulder with Bahuns on the Bahuns' exalted seat, the wound from teaching girls Kapuri 'Ka' in the school against the order of things willed by Manu, and the unfathomable anguish of the blow that these uncountable wounds dealt to his local autocratic rule...

The profound hopes of the *deusi* players were unexpectedly frosted over.

For the first time in life I saw—flowing tears falling, Lila Sir was crying. My pa and others who wanted *deusi* to go on joined their hands in supplication at Lila Sir's side, made a thousand pleas and urgings. But Lila Sir's wounded heart, thrashed by the rod of insult, didn't mind them; on no account would it mind them.

And, with a gloomy countenance, Lila Sir set off, leaving the school forever.

At the moment of parting he grasped my hand, stroked it lovingly. His throat was choked with emotion, his eyes brimming. In a despondent voice he said - "Don't fret. The *mukhiya* has said—'black goes, white comes'. I've become black, decrepit, now the new and white will come." I didn't understand the meaning beneath the surface of those words. Burying

my head in Lila Sir's hands, I simply cried. I had nothing to say. I was just expressing my own mute inner anguish, the uncontrollable waves churning in my suffocating heart spilling out in tears.

My Prometheus had come as a halo of light—to my side, into my village. He left crying. And I felt the whole village had gone dark. As if the sun had set in mid-day.

So it was in the year 1959.

Though they were ever so fragile, Lila Sir had fitted wings to my mind. Unfurling those wings I went to the high school in Aathrai, Terathum across the Tamor River from the village. And then, passing through its Intermediate Arts, I came to Kathmandu to take the exam.

The events and times of thirty-two long years passed by. In this interval I went just twice to my birthplace. In a rush when going, when returning also in a rush. I had no chance to stop in his village, Sangrumma, to meet Lila Sir. When meeting relatives who would know his news, I would ask after his health. Long after the fact I came to know that his first partner had left him for a new husband. And then he too had a new family. The two nests teemed with children. Now and then I'd hear: Lila Sir's village mastership is somehow carrying on. His household too, with hardships and pleasures, is getting by. His health is not bad. The old man has great honor in his village...

In 1993 a relative brought a message: Lila Sir is staying at the Milan Lodge behind Bir Hospital, go to meet him. Lila Sir? On the slate of my memory, a profusion of joyous and sorrowful experiences of the remote past suddenly sprang vividly to life.

I was caught up in some messy problems of work. I went, but only three days after receiving the news. And, to my grief I found out—Lila Sir had left that very day. With a repentance-filled forlorn heart I returned. Remorse grew in my mind—the old man would have been pained, he'd have thought me ungrateful. After returning home I recounted many things about Lila Sir's qualities to my daughter. And my mind found a little relief.

After that I received word from the mouth of another relative in 1995: "Lila Sir has come to Kathmandu. Don't go anywhere tomorrow morning, he's coming to meet you."

The next day, becoming fanciful in my curiosity, I sat watching the path all morning long. It struck eight, and then nine, yet Lila Sir didn't come. Finally around a quarter after nine he arrived. There was unbounded curiosity in my mind about what the old man would be like after the passage of so much time. I'd heard that sometime just last year he'd had a

major stomach operation. And in my mind there was a little worry about his health. Finally the old man came, smiling even from beyond my gate he came. I joined my hands in greeting, 'namaskar'; he didn't raise his hands. Coming on without a pause he grasped my two hands and looked straight into my eyes—for a long moment he just kept looking. As if the wise, compassionate Prometheus who came into my village was for the first time lovingly touching me, the child. I must have been choked by emotion—I stared spellbound at the old man, just gazing speechlessly.

"Little one. Today, passing up the temple of Pashupatinath, I've come on pilgrimage."

Hearing this I started—what's the old man saying, talking like this?

I seated Lila Sir in my book room. I saw: wrung by cruel time the old man is feeble. Imprinted by time, battered by the burden of responsibilities, his spine is a little bent. His face is gray, the bones at his temples protrude. But in his face, beneath that surface on which the harsh calluses of time have settled, that same gracious feeling, gentleness the same, lovingness the same—that selfsame beloved Prometheus of the days of my youth ...

I was alone in the house. I gave the old man a newspaper to while away the time and made tea. Peeled oranges and cut apples. And then I set a plate before him. As he began to eat, gesturing his limit with his hand Lila Sir said—"Little one, there's just this much of my stomach left, even less than a quarter. The rest was cut out and thrown away. Thanks to the boon of science I've survived up to this day." After this, he said some other things praising the life-giving wonders of science.

After drinking his tea Lila Sir went over to my bookshelves. Running his eye slowly over each cubbyhole, he looked at the books. And in a most encouraging tone he said, "Good. A book is a thing of many virtues, little one. Read with a sharp eye; they will scarcely do any harm."

Lila Sir sat down again. And then in a voice that seemed in part sentimental, in part despondent, he began to recount the old tale of the master in the guise of a boatsman. He said: "A master is a boatsman. He ferries passers-by to the far side; as for himself it's always and forever the near side. The passer-by goes beyond the seven hills, presses onward traversing the seven seas. He becomes Columbus, and then Vasco da Gama... The disciple turns to sugar, the guru remains treacle, ever treacle." Having said this much Lila Sir laughed—that same gracious, gentle and beautiful laugh. "But little one"—again he became emotional—"I'm proud to have had the chance to be a boatsman; it's I who am the boatsman who ferried you across life's first river. Maybe

you've forgotten. Those ferried across forget; those who ferry others across keep on remembering."

Bowing my head in gratitude I just sat in a mute pose.

Lila Sir had to go somewhere quickly. After sitting about an hour and a half he was in a hurry to be off. How to take leave of him? I became agitated. There were not the best of clothes on his body, his shoes were worn thin. Going into the bedroom I rooted hectically through pockets. I found a thousand rupee note. To give it to him or not—my mind was in a quandary. Would the old man think it respect or insult, it was difficult for me to be sure. Finally, mind circling round and round in a swirl of conflict, my slightly trembling hand stretched out toward the old man. The old man looked at the note and then looked up at my face. "It's not necessary little one", he said with a heavy heart, "you must have plenty of problems too."

The old man was speaking; as he went on talking I slipped the note into his shirt pocket. Just as upon arrival, he grasped my hands. As if remembering the boisterous boy of that remote village of three and half decades before, he lovingly stroked my hands. The gratitude in his vein-filled eyes was boundless. And then, at the last, the old man said, "Little one, however many books you've written, search them out and send them to me. Don't forget this thing. All I wish from you is this." Saying that much, he took his leave.

Slightly bent spine, rickety body, slowly slowly lifting steps—I watched the departure of the Prometheus of my youth with sentimental eyes—watched on looking nowhere but at him.

It was about a year to the day when Lila Sir came again. He had, I learned, come to Kathmandu for a health checkup. This time his arrival was extremely informal, as if coming to a place he frequented all the time. While still on his way in the old man said emotionally, "Upon sighting a pathside shrine, little one, passers-by will come to offer flowers. You know what they say, those who pass by the path leading to a relative's are without virtue." He came straight on inside and sat in just the spot where he had sat before. The old man didn't have much time to spare. Call it an unfortunate coincidence, this time too my wife was not at home. She'd already left for work. Nor was my daughter there. The old man said, "I haven't had a chance to get acquainted with your wife, nor your daughter either..."

It was the month of Phalgun. A Kathmandu morning, the dew not yet departed. The weather was bracingly cold. Just as before I fed him a few slices of fruit and some tea. The old man raised the subject of the books—

I had not been able to search out even a single one. Recalling my own heedlessness I was shamed by my mistake. He was to go to the hospital once again, and in a rush to leave after the stomach examination. After donning his shoes Lila Sir stepped down to the front walk. Swirling in the sun's weak rays, the freezing cold Himalayan winter wind was blowing steadily. As he stood in the yard about to take his leave I saw that the cold had set the old man's lips trembling. There was an old sweater on his body. It seemed to be more for looks than for warmth. I turned the thought over in my mind—if only I could get him a really good sweater... Saying "Wait just a moment", I went inside and started rooting through pockets. I didn't find enough money to buy a sweater. What could I do? My heart was in turmoil. My eye fell upon a new sweater draped on a hanger, the sweater my wife had finished knitting for our son just the other day. Deploying my most silken voice of persuasion, I consoled my hapless son: "Little one, let's send this one off with the old man. We'll see about maybe buying you another later." And, placing the sweater in the old man's hands I said diffidently, "Sir, this is a friend to filter out the cold."

To take it or not, take it or not..., finally the old man accepted the sweater. And then he draped it, Gurkha-style, over his shoulders and set off. After he reached beyond the gate the old man stopped. In that same old way he grasped my hands, stroked them just the same as ever.

"Little one!" In a voice as if choked with emotion, deep yet feeble, he said, "Little one! I survive in you. And I'm happy." His eyes brimmed. Unable to say anything more, he walked steadily away.

* * * *

On the telephone my daughter's voice trembled, "Pa, I hear Lila Shivakoti passed away."

"What...Lila Shivakoti?"

Fire is life. And in my understanding, Lila Sir's other name is Fire. Warm, bright, life-giving and beautiful fire. Can it be that fire is now extinguished, never to be lit again?

Wave after wave of memories arise in my mind. Lila Sir teaching the first romantic lessons of geography and history. The Lila Sir who, grasping his hand, in loving tones is teaching Samgram Bahadur Sarki his Kapuri 'Ka'. The Lila Sir who's advocating female education in a dark village. The Lila Sir who's setting the earth of my village to revolving around the sun. The Lila Sir who's pointing a warning finger at the very existence of heaven's Indra, hell's Yamraj and the village *mukhiya* and

priests. The Lila Sir who is spreading ripples of new thought and new civility through the village... And the Lila Sir who, after respectfully sitting me, the criminal, down in the chair, is saying,

"Today you cut your own nose. And you cut my nose too."

...

"Fine, cry to your heart's content. Cleanse your soiled heart with your tears."

I'm watching: in the scape of my memory Lila Sir's unfading footsteps rise one upon another. Atop words of inspiration a mound of other words of inspiration has accumulated. I'm watching with the eyes of memory: before my mind's eye Lila Sir's unsullied footsteps and lofty words, layer upon layer, adding chain upon chain, impressing the shape of a Sagarmatha. This Sagarmatha of my emotional world is the vast reflection of Lila Sir. The Prometheus of my youth, ablaze with the light of his own ideas and deeds, my beloved guru, my guide, my true friend—Lila Shivakoti.

As high and noble Sagarmatha my beloved Prometheus stands erect in memory's scape. And, standing at the foot looking with eyes of respect singlemindedly upward—me, mountaineer...!

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