

volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 4, Issue 1

Summer 2021

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 June 2021

Date of Publication: 21 June 2021

Citation: Adam Thorpe, 'Disturbance', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 4.1 (2021), 198–200.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v4i1.1538.g1651

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Disturbance

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‘Search for my heart no longer: the wild beasts have eaten it.’
(Charles Baudelaire, ‘Causerie’)

The Tollygunge Club required a certain courage to enter. Although those of Indian origin were just as welcome as whites (or any other colour combination), an invisible net fell upon everyone present that ensured the divide remained. The one unifying factor was the smell of whisky or gin beneath a pall of sweet tobacco.

The mansion’s tall and slender colonnades ensured that everyone felt dwarfed.

After ten years or so of Independence, Calcutta was already crumbling. The fabric of the city was not yet in mortal danger, but cracks and mossy patches were ineluctably growing. Upkeep was neglected, in favour of stark new concrete buildings of a sickly pallor. The old hands, white or native, grumbled, but most skulls remained intact these days, and the chances of being singled out by a loose brick or rock were now minimal. Skyscrapers did not yet march across the horizon. Very few buildings stretched higher than four or five floors. The city was still, in theory, on a human scale.

The teeming crowds below, however, had begun to grow restless and were already flooding from the countryside into the narrow streets of the slums. The poor died in droves and it might take weeks to remove a beggar’s corpse, even from the smart suburbs with their broad and leafy avenues. The houses there were huge, especially from the point of view of a child like Timothy, for whom home meant the cool of a living-room and its rattling air-conditioner, or the momentary swelter of the garden as you slipped into the relief of its deep shade, with spacious fields and tall reeds beyond.

The family *ayab* was skinny with narrow cheek-bones, her agelessness something indistinguishable from the rest, like her patchouli-scented skin and its hint of animal sweat. This

smell was resurrected whenever Timothy stroked the tiger pelt draped over the couch, the fur showing bare patches of hide, the muzzle hard and dry. The gloom within was to keep the cool from crumbling into the swelter of outdoors, where it eventually met with the honking cars and taxis you could taste on your tongue. The traffic was still light back then, however, in the 1950s – much of it powered by bony beasts (responsible for the ubiquitous heaps of dung), or the pressure of naked foot on rusty pedal.

Until the burglary, life was uneventful and even pleasant. Timothy's *ayah* accompanied him to his first school (the Elementary), nattering to their driver, her slim hands with their bony fingers weaving an airy dance. Timothy's mother was already poorly with some unidentified disease that kept her mostly in bed for week after week, staining the air.

Meanwhile, Father's laugh boomed with hearty frequency, hiding his distress.

Timothy had a special friendship with their sweeper, who was an Untouchable with an enormous beard, its sinuousness always shiny with oil and beautifully groomed. 'He has impeccable manners,' Mother declared from her creaking basketweave couch, and Father agreed. Timothy felt proud on the sweeper's behalf. His name was Rahul.

Then the burglars came. They were efficient and deadly, cutting the heavy-duty wire and breaking in by the much flimsier side door. Fortunately, given the murderous reputation of these criminals, Father's sleep-filled reaction to the disturbance was merely to fetch a glass of water, settle Timothy and ignore, still half asleep, the curious fact that the door, opening onto the huge central living-room, was ajar.

His father closed it without checking behind, a chance decision that undoubtedly saved the entire family from a gory fate.

Mother's jewellery box of ebony, placed for safety just behind her head, had been emptied as if by a wraith, leaving only a near-worthless coin (an old shilling from the 1840s). The deadly curved *kukri* blade, razor-sharp, had been fetched down from its perch and lay in the corner. Nothing else was missing.

The police were not that interested, given the break-in did not involve a killing. Ever after, of course, Timothy's curiosity grew into a maddening need to clarify what had happened, to shed light on the murk and the secrecy. The slim brown hand of the burglar (while Timothy himself only ever pictured one individual, it was much more likely there were several) loomed with ghastly frequency in his feverish dreams, which prolonged drug use only worsened from his late teens.

A few years later, back home in Chiswick for the Easter holidays (he was reading French at Exeter), his father's long furlough now over without regrets, Timothy jumped ship without warning.

Only a bundle of washing, left on the fifteenth floor of the anonymous tower block dominating the Old Kent Road, provided any sort of clue, as the blustery wind revealed dawn.

Few were surprised, given his long history of depression, anxiety or worse, including two previous suicide attempts. No one but close family recalled the trauma of the burglary long before. It had marked him deeply, we all agreed.

Found quite by chance near the bins, above a line of poetry in French, also in his own hand ('Ne cherchez plus mon cœur; les bêtes l'ont mangé'), the single word *gunge* was written in shaky block capitals on a carefully folded sheet of foolscap.

Whether this had any bearing on the tragedy, with its dim reminder of the famous colonial club, no one knew.

The rest was silence.