Romesh Gunesekera, *Suncatcher*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019. 312 pp. ISBN: 9781526610379.

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… the poor past
used to believe in us, his great grandchildren.
He dreamed that we could escape
from the trap which in every generation was set
by Danton and Robespierre, Beria and the other
ambitious disciples. Because there is no refuge,
there is refuge. Because invisible things
exist together with sounds
that no one hears. There is no consolation
and there is consolation, under
the elbow of desire, where pearls
would grow, if only tears had memories.
… dawn and the milkman get up early
and run through the snow, leaving white traces,
soon filled with water. A small bird
drinks that water and it sings and once more
it saves the disorder of things and you and me
and the singing.

— from “In the Past”, by Adam Zagajewski (1945-2021)

The novel’s narrator Kairo is looking back on his early adolescence, inquiring into a past defined by loss, class, yearning for adult freedoms, the rise of nationhood in Ceylon, and a struggle for the right politics on which to build that nation, which is, in so many ways these days, a silly idea when you consider the challenges our world faces today. Nationhood, nationalism, I couldn’t help thinking as I read Romesh Gunesekera’s latest novel, maybe was a good idea during the pre-Columbian era, and even after, the time in which Black Elk lived, in the Oglala Sioux Nation. Gunesekera has a single epigraph for the novel by Black Elk that enhances Kairo’s memoir in a number of ways, but more on that later.

Kairo played a crucial role in a personal event that much later (many years later) sharpens his vision of the recent history of Sri Lanka (Ceylon in the novel’s time-set), an island that is so much a world, and more than that: a universe of the soul. And so you keep reading, sailing along despite the slow, river-like curves occasionally pooling into small bays. But that’s a novel’s constitution, its democratic right to be

itself, and the reluctance to engage too soon, and too directly with the past, especially with traumatic events, is natural and wise. It's how the imagination, along with memory, works best.

In *Suncatcher*, Gunesekera's sixth novel (or seventh if you consider the linked stories in *Noontide Toll*, his superb previous book, strictly a novel), adolescence is the primary force. It's set against the frequently childish behaviour of parents, and in particular, as usual with Gunesekera, includes characters steeped in political naivety and folly, which is mainly the case here for the time is 1964 and a harshly just socialism is brewing; religious division is also afoot, and school is out for the foreseeable future. The pursuit of happiness and pursuit as happiness are of supreme importance to the boys, yet the adults, as they so often do, keep getting in the way, though not always; and when they should, they don't.

An impending danger and all its promises lace the minutes and hours of Kairo's and Jay's burning-days, a friendship key to Kairo's summer of '64 and the events that occurred, marking him forever.

The opening sentence sets up the novel and all its concerns, indeed nearly all of Gunesekera's, with the exception of cricket, perfectly: "I first met Jay in a church car park off the high road, midway as the crow flies between the mosque and the temple, one June afternoon in 1964; two boys on the brink of a bond that would alter the course of our lives, neither knowing which one would blink first, or fall furthest – nor the cost of finding out." (3)

The boys build cages to protect birds (both of which are plentiful in this novel and vital to its themes, as they were to Black Elk and his people), bike race, hang out cowboy style at the Milk Bar, and play rough games of chase at Jay's Uncle Elvin's estate while trying to dodge the encroachment of adult responsibility and lack of it that inexorably and absurdly – and politically – is rousing itself to threaten everything around them. The contrast between the adult voices and those of Kairo's and Jay's is acute not just in what is said, but in how. Sonya, Jay's mother, estranged from his father, is a delightful but sad example of the crumbling adult world, yet she's so right about love. And at first Kairo is attracted to her:

> Her caftan – oyster blue – could have adorned Cleopatra in some Technicolor oasis. She flicked it up at her shoulders, letting air swirl in. 'I'm so happy you are here, Kairo. Otherwise this darling boy of mine will be just talking to himself like you-know-who.'
>
> My head spun, not knowing what she meant.
>
> Then she picked up an elegant, saucer-shaped glass of pale rose' by its stem and started up the stairs. The whole room below darkened in her wake.
>
> 'What else to do?' Jay called after her. 'You never listen, no, to what anyone says.'
>
> She stopped at the top and turned. 'When a man can speak without punching a hole in his hat, then I might listen. But you, my darling, I listen to all the time. So, now you listen to me.' She

> took a sip from her glass. Then looked, I thought, directly at me. 'You must learn to live, and to love, without regret. That is paramount.'
>
> 'What'd she mean?' I asked when she had gone.
>
> 'She's the crazy one. She says, if not for us, she'd be a film star. But if not for Pater, she'd be in some loony bin. Come on, let's go for a loaf.' (45-46)

There's a potential infatuation Kairo has for Sonya, but I had the feeling Gunesekera deliberately reigned it in. It teased strongly, yet when her problems become evident to Kairo, and Jay's charm – older fraternal qualities of leadership, knowledge, and in Jay's case an upper-class, gung-ho joie de vivre – completely seduces Kairo we see the necessary and inevitable shift from the frail, filigreed moods of Sonya who becomes increasingly adrift in her malaise and eventual depression. Jay's father and debonair Uncle Elvin, collector of sporty cars and others, follow suit each in their own way, Kairo's father Clarence endearing and buffoonish in his role as keen socialist supporter (despite being told by his employer he will no longer be permitted to speak or write English at work), Jay's father vague on family commitments and seeking escape from them and Ceylon.

Jay frequently advises Kairo on the unreliability of adults and this strand is woven throughout the novel until near the end when Jay's separation from and his contempt for them are intense. Among other things, it drives him to share the tremendous, circular ballet of many thousands of barn swallows moving as one before they settle into the coconut palms along a beach at dusk that he's taken Niromi (his girlfriend) and Kairo to. It's a memorable and beautiful experience of the natural world, which Gunesekera is noted for throughout his work. Here, it proves to be a profound but indefinable link to an ancient past, I thought, something truer, more real, more beautiful, Kairo senses, than anything else in his entire life. It's the poetry of the sacred earth, and they recognize it, all three of them, yet to understand it is too much. Gunesekera however understands nature's great influence and importance because in Sri Lanka the natural world remains strongly present; the ancient links have not been entirely lost.

Jay and Kairo, accompanied by Channa, another friend, soon embark on their ultimate adventure, one that will reverberate again and again after you finish reading because a future cannot be built on surrendering control of society, nor can it be built on too much control; obviously, some balance between the two is needed. But how do we do that? And what kind of politics do we do it with? These questions are subtextual in the novel, which isn't simply a story of a last boyhood hurrah before adult responsibilities are forced on the boys and they're no longer allowed to choose and follow the things that pull them through life. Much more than that, and because of the novel's time-set the story is about the life we've given ourselves

today on the island called planet earth. An island is a world, the Trinidadian novelist and short story writer Sam Selvon said in 1955 (it's also the title of his second novel). This is a fine strand Gunesekera has woven with admirable skill into *Suncatcher*.

The novel's epigraph reads: "The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars … Birds make their nests in circles … The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle."

That's Black Elk of the Oglala Sioux talking, one of the last real Americans. His book is well worth reading. Why, we may wonder, has the author placed these words in a novel about childhood's last light in Ceylon, an island that experienced in its civil war some of the worst atrocities in the modern world? Sure, the boys play a version of cowboys and Indians on Uncle Elvin's coconut estate, but there's more to it than that, for when is a game just a game? Play is all politics, now more so than ever. The estate section "Gallinago" involves Gerry, the son of the caretaker of the estate. What Jay and Kairo do to him is casual, playful, dangerous, somewhat dehumanizing and not so accidental. It gets out of hand, in particular with Jay, whose view, or lack of one, is what disturbs most. Kairo, as he regrets later, goes along with it, even when he knows it's wrong.

Gunesekera is well aware of the humanely strategic necessity in art of approaching volatile situations indirectly when needed. He's a subtle writer, wonderfully gifted, careful of his art, his vision, and how to show what is most difficult. *Suncatcher* is not really a historical novel; it's a contemporary one, in every line, paragraph and page; it speaks to our contemporary world using the past as light.

The novel's short last section, "Fireflies", in its tenderness, poetic truth, beauty, and hard-earned, heart-breaking wisdom reminded me of Shiva Naipaul's "An Unfinished Journey", also set in Sri Lanka, in his posthumous nonfiction collection *An Unfinished Journey*. But Gunesekera is unique among writers of the so-called postcolonial world, if such a term still has any currency, in that, like Adam Zagajewski, who should have been awarded the Nobel Prize years ago (one wonders what kind of vodka the Nobel Prize Literature Committee has been drinking, and how much these last ten years), he shows us how we can live with the past – that is, in a fertile *disorder*, not in the way the pedantic political lackeys and bombastic revolutionaries of the extreme right and left want to, but in a manner that restores, protects and reveals further the beauty of people and the world, which, despite our continuing efforts to destroy it and ourselves, still calls to us. There are many ways to address the past, and possibly they are never-ending: the literary imagination has shown and will keep showing us how. We all need to try to praise the mutilated world

Zagajewski said in perhaps his most famous poem, “Try to Praise the Mutilated World”, which is certainly one of the greatest poems of the last five hundred-plus years.

In 2013, Gunesekera said in a *Granta* interview: “The past has never been as present as it is now in the world. But at the same time, all over the world, the determination to manipulate what we know has also never been stronger. It’s very much Orwell’s world where those who control the present want to control the past because those who control the past can control the future.”

Romesh Gunesekera is a major literary artist of Sri Lanka’s birth and its aftermath; his achievements have been well lauded, but I doubt they’ve been fully recognized, as many reviews of his last novel, *The Prisoner of Paradise*, set in another island, Mauritius, indicate. In his several novels and *Monkfish Moon*, his first book and short story collection, he has brought not just Sri Lanka to account, but the world. The world is an island. The Nobel Prize Literature Committee should seriously consider short-listing him; but first, I recommend they read *The Wet and the Dry: A Drinker’s Journey* by Lawrence Osborne, for there, if they cannot give up the kind of vodka they’ve been drinking for the last ten years, they will find a better one, shrewdly analyzed by Osborne himself, immaculately made, gentler on the liver and therefore less harmful to literary analysis.

Dixi.