



A Little Dust on the Eyes (extract)

by **Minoli Salgado**

shortlisted for the
2012 SI Leeds Literary Prize

At Dolmen House family life expanded and the days ran together in uneven eddies. It was easy to slip into the arms of this new time, to be drawn into belonging by those who lived here as if her city life were a mere interruption to these days moved by water, between still and moving water, between river and lagoon and the echo of the sea. She would kick off her canvas shoes and plunge into calls of cousins, climbing trees with her toes, spray cycling over puddles, chasing chickens and stray dogs into days that gleamed bright as the brass she polished with her aunt. Here the hours would unfold in her drift past kachcheris full of court case conversations where she gathered small stories of adultery and theft and later drew them from her pockets to examine with Renu in the privacy of her room. This, after the somnolence of a ride on a skiff; this, after an illicit swim among blue lilies.

Even her mother who in the last years had veered between restlessness and sleep, gave in to the wholeness of this unbroken time. She would sit in her rocking chair, alone among the restive water birds, communication between them intact.

And Savi had relaxed too. Too, too much, as Renu would say. She relaxed so much that it seemed to her she grew and became someone she did not recognize anymore. Her body gained in power as she ran from room to room, from garden to garage, the beach and back before breakfast, scrambling into Renu's bed with *Nakitinne LazyBones!*, before being turfed out by ayah who said her dirty feet would muss it all up, and clattering downstairs to gather the still warm eggs, without sense of boundary or time. Here she gained a fortified sense of self, an energy that filled her before wearing her out, returning at night to the sanctuary of her moonstruck bed to slide into forgotten dreams under

the watchful gaze of shadow puppets and her aunt's pastel eyes. Years later she would read of *the devastating totality of childhood* and know exactly what the words meant.

She had slipped free from her mother in the expanding silence between them. Her mother who lay at the still warm centre, blurred between tablets and sleep. But one time her mother had roused herself to speech. One time she had wanted to talk.

'Savi, please bring that book and read to me.'

It was a quiet command, all the more powerful for the tone in which it was said. Savi looked about for shelter but no excuses could be found. Renu was inside, busy with a violin lesson that was stopping and starting in time with Fiona's fingers on the piano. Romesh was out with a friend. Savi reached over the table for the hard blue book and ran the ridges of the embossed title under her fingertips.

'Which story would you like?' She tried to hide her reluctance to read, aware that this was the first time her mother had asked anything of her for some time.

'Any one. It doesn't matter. You don't mind do you?'

'No of course not,' she said too quickly.

She opened the book and flicked through the pages to the point where a ribboned bookmark lay. She held the book open and turned the bookmark sideways so it supported a clean line of print.

“*The Visitor*”, she began, sitting back against the light and drawing one leg under her. ”
His hands were weary,’ this might mean something like ‘wary’ or ‘wiry’ so she slurred
her reading to allow for both possibilities, “though all night they had lain over the
sheets of his bed and he moved them only to his mouth and his wild heart.”

Savi paused and re-read this in silence as the meaning gradually came to her and the
words touched the woman behind. Her mother’s face was blocked by the page, her hair
just a small wing above the cover. Trust her to have picked a story about a sick man!
She sat up, refolded her legs and continued.

“The veins ran, unhealthily blue streams, into the white sea”.

This was not what she wanted. She wished to go. And Renu must be finishing her lesson
now. She looked towards the dining hall and saw the table lamps had been lit, then
turned back to her mother who seemed to be somewhere else. ‘Sounds too strong, no?
Do you want me to carry on?’

Her mother drew her gaze from the water and looked straight at her. Savi tried to
deflect its directness by looking as blank as possible.

‘Putha’ Her mother never called her *daughter*, only *son*. Savi knew she was going to say
something she may not wish to hear. ‘Listen. This thing inside,’ she was always vague
when referring to her illness, ‘it will not go away.’

So here it was. The Talk that her parents were always muttering about. The Talk that
would help her Adjust. Her mother had avoided it for too long, Savi heard her father say

one night through the beaded curtain of her bedroom in the city. Savi looked away but her mother's silence forced her to look back.

'We must accept,' her mother was all-too-present now, 'You must accept as I have done. If you accept you will find there is nothing to be scared of. This thing ...'

Savi hated Thing. She wished it had another name, something personal that could be confronted. Her mother's eyes, brilliant in their darkness, would not let her go. Thing had changed her. She looked different, her face pulled into the contradictions of the last few months. For her skin was too pale against the shining eyes, her hair too black against the wasted neck, the lips too full against the angle of her cheek and she was far, far too young to be saying the words she was now saying as she reached out her arms and began to smile in a way both puzzling and strange, releasing her into a softness that made Savi feel she was about to tumble in space.

'It's a rubbish story. I hate it!' She dropped the book and ran into the house, scrambling up the stairs so Renu paused and put her violin down and saw the earthy smudges that followed her up as she went running straight to her room where she flung the window open and thrust her face into guava leaves, into the pungency of fruit, breathing green air in, out, in, out, till ants crept into her ears and she shook her head free.

She did not remember these bars on the windows. Just the sweet sickly smell of guavas and salt and mud and sun on mouldering lilies. It was the muddled smell of everything at once and it was still there now, shuttered in the room. She lifted the catch and released the grille, felt a momentary loss of gravity as she thrust her face into light, the glare of

the afternoon tightening her eyes. No leaves. The tree had gone. In its place a thin papaya tree with disproportionately tiny fruit, struggling through shrubs. The warm spread of lawn extending to the thickening reeds on the river bank, and the dark shade of the mango trees at the water's edge screening the lilies on the lagoon. The lotuses had gone, plucked into oblivion by temple sellers, but the lily pads remained and might be seen if she looked westward toward the far reaches of the sandbank. She pushed a twist of hair under the fold of her scarf. Somewhere behind her she heard a motorbike drawing a low guttural stream of sound along the river road. She kept looking ahead as the sound of the motorbike gave way to birdsong and the rolling hush of the sea, adjusting her gaze to the marbled expanse of sky and the interruption of distant leaves, adjusting to this rich smell of earthy water. She became conscious, for the first time, of the lack of human interplay before her, that her window faced away from the town, that all the buildings were behind her. The neighbourhood kitchens of gossip, the kachcheris stacked with restless clerks and rusty filing cabinets, the courts bustling with the self-importance of armed police, the small white temple drowsy with pirith prayers, the echoing arches of the church with its single sonorous bell, the clinking glasses of the resthouse where businessmen and western backpackers shared an evening beer. It was as if in all the time spent in this room she had been looking in the wrong direction, had been facing the wrong way, and if she were to turn around and walk steadily towards town she might come face to face with a different story of her past.

As she watched the white light of the afternoon annihilate the lawn, stripping it naked before her, she began to wonder at what might have been unraveling behind her as she had rushed to rouse these green gardens into colour.