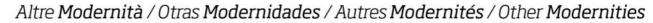# Writing In-between Life and Death: Contemplation as Death Ritual in Michael Ondaatje's "Death at Kataragama"

by Liberty Kohn

Michael Ondaatje's collection of poetry, *Handwriting*, uses writing as a metaphor for Sri Lanka's pre-alphabetic, multi-modal forms of writing, thought, and culture that have disintegrated during Sri Lanka's long and ongoing history of colonial contact. One prose poem in the collection, "Death at Kataragama," presents a speaker pondering life lived between two cultures as well as death and the removal from human form. Kataragama, being both a god and city, both a metaphysical space and a physical place, defines a struggle between a self located in multiple cultural identities, but also within the space of physical/metaphysical conflict. In the poem, the conflict of the physical and metaphysical forces the speaker to contemplate a cultural identity that is between cultures. Thus, the contemplation of and writing about cultural longing and belonging are complicit in spirituality and preparation for death, suggesting that the subject's reflection on multiple cultural identities and the subject's concomitant alienation and conflict can *add* meaning to life, rather than simply alienate one from essential matters. In "Death at Kataragama," the contemplation of death, direct commentary on the passing from the physical to the metaphysical, allows the speaker to use personal examination of multiple cultural identities as the central concern in finding the meaning of one's life, and to use this contemplation on identity and the writing of it into poetic form as a ritual in preparation of death.

ONDAATJE AND CULTURAL IN-BETWEENNESS

Handwriting, like much of Ondaatje's work, belongs to what Homi Bhabha termed in *The Location of Culture* an "in-between cultural space" that allows the writer's

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identity to be read in a variety of forms. Ondaatje's own identity is comprised mainly by a Sri Lankan-Canadian continuum that is his personal heritage. His autobiographical text, *Running in the Family*, positions him in "the space of unstable cultural identities, [...] nationalism and colonialism, [and] the discourse of history seen as an endless palimpsest" (Festino 2006, 137), and his writings in poetry, fiction, and non-fiction typically include cultural hybridity and in-betweenness. (I shall retain the latter representative term for the duration of this article.)

Handwriting finds Ondaatje exploring the history of Sri Lanka through its variety of language, culture, and ancestral poetries. In a 2000 interview, Ondaatje related the foundational interests of *Handwriting* as a wish to go beyond "the contemporary snapshot [of Sri Lanka] we get in the West" to begin "relearning an awareness of a deeper historical portrait" (Jaggi 6) of Sri Lanka. Part of Ondaatje's project in *Handwriting* is to give voice to histories and civilizations not captured in alphabetic script, Western alphabetic literacy, or modern Euro-centric history through the collection's focus on lost modes of writing as a metaphor for lost cultural practices. Cielo Festino suggests that part of Ondaatje's project is to "recover the recent and ancient cultural history of [Sri Lanka and] deconstruct the concept of logocentrism" (2006, 136). This view of logocentrism, borrowed from Derrida, suggests that writing not only represents thought, but guarantees the possibility of recovering these thoughts. Such recovery is impossible, however, according to the Derridean view. The reader always plays a role in interpretation, changing the original semantic, pragmatic, and historical context of the text.

Festino suggests that Ondaatje's collection asks its own reader to acknowledge their interpretive role and "bridge the gaps of this difference. In this move Ondaatje's own process of composition and his view of culture as an interlocking heterogeneous network of differences become possible" (2006, 139). I suggest that Ondaatje's in-between cultural identity is not an either/or choice, but a changeable, situated identity amongst a network of choices. As "Death in Kataragama" suggests, contemplating one's existence in such a network of multiplicity can add meaning to not only one's physical, cultural life, but to the point of contact where the physical and metaphysical meet.

RELIGION AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Religion as a cultural value or site that can be included or excluded from syncretic impulses has often times been omitted in both methods of interpretation or their application. To date, cultural identity has often been treated through race, gender, and class (Dines and Humez 2003, 4; Hooks 2000, 7), potentially leaving religion, spirituality, or the metaphysical/physical relationship under-discussed. Francis Fukayama suggested in 1992's *The End of History and the Last Man* that religion was an overlooked value in global politics and postmodern theory that would become a tipping point in international and intercultural understanding (214). Similarly, Peter

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Van Der Veer suggests that "secularist assumptions about secular progress and the decline of religion have hindered the development of an adequate understanding of the importance of religion in the modern world" (2004, 221). Most discussion of religion is still framed by political or cultural context, and discussion of religion and spirituality as the point of contact where the physical and metaphysical meet are marginalized. Thus, religion is typically discussed through one of three basic vantage points: an "Othered," minority cultural value; a positive but discursive representation established by the colonial; or a cultural entity which natives remake to produce an external, colonial-introduced religion that better suits the indigenous culture.

The first of these categorical treatments of minority religion is addressed by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin. They note that "European societies since the eighteenth century, while continuing to subscribe to a notional religious affiliation have really understood truth as a matter for scientific, secular reason alone. The sacral has been dismissed as at best a myth and at worst a superstition" (2004, 516). Benita Parry argues that

> "in discussion of modernity, emphasis has been placed on separating reason from its expression in religion and metaphysics and situating it in the autonomous spheres of science, morality and art (Weber), or on the revolt against the normalizing function of tradition (Habermas)" (2002, 16).

In this view, religion equates with superstition and is not productive of useful or developmental knowledge. Modernity's lines of reasoning suggest that cultures placing high value in religious modes of knowing are primitive or underdeveloped. Extending this hegemonic narrative into competing religious faiths, minority religions are equally superstitious and undeveloped when juxtaposed against hegemonic religions such as Christianity. William Baldridge notes that

> "the foundation of colonial Christianity rests on its power to monopolize definitions: who is godless, godly, and most godly [...]. knowledge of reality, they invite a challenge of hubris. When Christians confuse the limitations of their humanity with the nature of God, they invite a challenge of blasphemy. Who can claim absolute knowledge of reality but God alone?" (1996, 85)

Religious essentialism is a form of cultural essentialism, and religion can label and subordinate competing religions and cultural practices as easily as non-religious essentialisms. Richard King posits that an attack on essentialism is correct because essentialism "misrepresents the heterogeneity of the subject matter, but also because of the way in which such essentialism results in the construction of a cultural stereotype that may then be used to subordinate, classify and dominate the non-Western world" (1996, 92). Targeting not just colonial religious practices but the literature from which they derive, R.S. Sugirtharajah argues that

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"the Bible is approached not for its intrinsic authoritativeness or distinctiveness, but because of the thematic presuppositions of postcolonialism, which are influenced by such cultural and psychological effects as hybridity and alienation triggered by colonialism. (2001, 258)
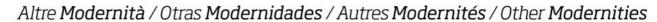
Even positive representations of minority religions are still discursive and are potentially dependant upon and labeled by the hegemonic culture's essentialist nature. As Richard King notes, "the romantic image of India portrays Indian culture as profoundly spiritual, idealistic, and mystical" (1999, 92). This romantic representation, perhaps construed as positive or non-colonial by many, is reductive and limits a diverse culture and its network of potential practices and identities, whether one is discussing the myriad networks of Indian culture or the network of only its religious and spiritual structures and networks.

Looking beyond essentialist labeling by hegemonic cultures toward an integration of hybrid cultures, the practices of a non-ritualistic nature. Thus, unlike the speaker's spiritual contemplation of cultural in-betweenness in "Death at Kataragama," past critical discussion of syncretic practices does not involve reflection upon or speculation about one's hybrid identity. For example, Gauri Viswanathan records the story of Narayan Viman Tilak, a Brahmin convert to Christianity whose

"syncretic ambition was shared by converts from other regions of India, who also sought through conversion to recover a 'national religion' that eliminated rather than preserved difference. The attempt to create a hybrid entity like 'Hindu Christianity' was a keenly felt aspect of this synthesizing project. (1998, 41)"

Tilak is, compared to the speaker in "Death at Kataragama," far more active in the world and active in eliminating difference. Ondaatje's speaker, contemplative and physically inactive, celebrates and uses, rather than eliminates through integration, the cultural differences of a hybrid or in-between existence. True, cultural difference may disintegrate in Ondaatje's speaker as he uses them for contemplation on the meaning of one's life and death. However, for Ondaatje's speaker, the differences and lack of cultural location must remain so that the speaker can continue contemplation and create a death ritual predicated upon in-betweenness and dislocation as an additive to one's spiritual existence.

Before beginning explication of "Death at Kataragama," I would briefly like to address another concern: migration of the political to sites often defined as part of the non-physical, apolitical (spiritual/metaphysical) realms. In these realms, spirituality and metaphysics are grouped with aesthetics. Thus, aesthetics is the metaphysical representative of the arts. The link between aesthetics and spirituality or metaphysics is well noted by those in theology, the humanities, and cultural studies. Both aesthetics and spirituality focus upon "beauty and wonder" (Musserl 2001, 52) and the "aesthetics of infinity" (Hoyles 1972, 31). Both utilize semiotics in the identification of the Greek "*kataphatic*, i.e. sensual perception" (Garcia-Rivera 1999, 5,72); DZ Phillips

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notes a "pervasive intellectual view in Western culture" that suggests a naivety in religious belief which should be replaced by secular aesthetics (2006, x-xi). Such a view demonstrates not only hegemony; it also demonstrates the aesthetic link that would allow art to replace religion as a mode of metaphysical experience. Just as spirituality and religion lead the self to the brink of the metaphysical, so does aesthetics. Both are part of the ineffable and un-embodied realm where the physical world touches upon the metaphysical.

I suggest that post-colonial theorist David Lloyd's discussion of aesthetics in *Anomalous States* provides a parallel for the discussion of the metaphysical/physical relationship found in "Death in Kataragama,"--a parallel not fully articulated in the post-colonial conversation on religion provided earlier. Lloyd argues that the aesthetic is the political, and that an "erosion of the aesthetic [is not] the demise of colonialism itself [...], but possibly its migration to another, necessarily less distinct sphere" (1993, 42). While Lloyd's observation that the disappearance of the colonial aesthetic does not equate with the disappearance of the colonial presence or the in-betweenness of the subject, Lloyd's criteria for colonial evaluation remain wholly political, cultural, and historicized. As in post-colonial discussions of religion, the meeting point of the physical and metaphysical (and the apolitical, acultural, and ahistorical matrices of the metaphysical) are not breached.

However, Lloyd's idea of migration is useful to understanding Ondaatje's "Death at Kataragama." In Ondaatje's poem, the theme does not involve oppressive spiritual systems or a loss or origins. Nor does the poem involve an elimination of difference or cultural in-betweenness in the subject, as with the earlier example of Tilak. Nor does it involve Lloyd's migration of the political to another realm. Nor is the poem's theme the obliteration of or escape from physical, political, or cultural sites through physical death and entrance into a metaphysical nirvana or heaven beyond hybrid conflict or alienation. Ondaatje's speaker remains culture bound.

Rather, the theme is the desire to retain the in-betweenness as a point of contemplation that provides the central meaning to one's life. Thus, the *process of contemplation* is important, not the physical or metaphysical space itself, and not the alienation, conflict, or synthesis of these identities. The divided self, the in-between status, not the synthesis of cultures, creates the theme required for contemplation. Thus, the poem's theme is not the inclusion of religion in syncretic practices; rather, the poem offers a process-driven ritual where full syncretism on the mental or emotional level is not desirable; the inability to achieve a complete syncretism in the material world allows the subject to contemplate in-betweenness and therein create ritual meaning in physical life. This contemplation is a process that becomes a worthy death ritual.

Equally important, the process of contemplation expressed in the process of writing is not based upon Lloyd's idea of the migration of the colonial political to another site. Rather, the colonial political is required to create the breach of self that allows for in-betweenness, contemplation, and death ritual. Migration of the political from the speaker's mind would make invisible the in-betweenness required for the

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process of contemplation that creates the death ritual. Lloyd's political residue could not migrate in a death ritual of "Kataragama"'s process. The political must not migrate and must remain visible in the subject's mind. Only a highly visible in-betweenness can be contemplated and create a cardinal concept in the ritual of death.

DEATH AT KATARAGAMA

Kataragama, located in Southeastern Sri Lanka, is a city where world religions and local religions and traditions inform each other's practices (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1999). Buddhists travel annually for blessing and worship. The city itself is home to a Buddhist god known by several names, including Lord Kataragama (Bastin 2002, 60). Hindus pilgrimage to the city to appease the war god, whose qualities are attributed to the city itself. The city also houses many Hindu temples and representative deities. Muslims travel to Kataragama to drink from a spring believed to be the fountain of life. The city is home to a variety of denominations of these religions, and the city additionally houses other cultures such as the Sinhalese and Tamil. Historically, the city is rich in both the internal and external architecture of these faiths. Thus, Kataragama is a site of multiple spiritual possibilities concretized as a physical location where many travel and worship to bridge the physical and metaphysical realms. Ondaatje's choice of Kataragama as the mental and geographic location to contemplate death fulfills the in-betweenness and network of choices that contemplation of in-betweenness requires. Kataragama is the perfect center upon which to contemplate differences of culture and religion, and the city is a geographic space to symbolize the point of contact between the physical and metaphysical realms due to Kataragama's history as a physical space highly metaphysicalized.

The poem appears late in the collection, allowing the resonance of the collection's exploration of Sri Lankan culture, language, religion, and symbol systems to inform the poem. Sam Solecki suggests of the collection *Handwriting* that "more than in any of [Ondaatje's] other books, the poems depend on one another [...] to create a pattern of resonate meaning" (2003, 23), and previous to "Death in Kataragama,"

> "we haven't heard previously the note of urgency that pulses through lines in the desire to compress written accounts of experience to the point that language itself disappears" (177).

If the poem is filled with the juxtaposition of cultures, much of the juxtapositioning is explicit in previous poems and implicit in "Death at Kataragama." Outward symbols or archetypes of the West are limited in the poem. Subtle motifs take resonance from previous poems exploring and rediscovering the indigenous language and history of Sri Lanka.

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The poem's first stanza places the speaker in the corridors of a house suffering a blackout and introduces the theme of Western technology through mention of electricity and writing. As James Ferguson suggests, urbanization in non-developed countries "seemed to be a teleological process, a movement toward a known endpoint that would be nothing less than a western-style industrial modernity" (1999, 5). However, in the poem we see modernity's failure and the failure of Western culture to provide a liveable, sustainable spiritual condition. This is symbolized by the failure of the house lights. As the poem opens, technology, the light of the West, has failed: "For half the day blackouts stroke this house into stillness so there is no longer a whirring fan or the hum of light."

Immediately upon the failure of this first Western technology, the second sentence introduces a second Western technology, writing, which the previous poems of the collection have slowly replaced with indigenous language and poetic forms: "You hear sounds of a pencil being felt for in a drawer in the dark and then see its thick shadow in candlelight, writing the remaining words." The transition from the failure of light and electricity is transferred upon language, the failure of Western language and culture resonating in previous poems in the collection. With the removal of the pencil we begin to see an emphasis on senses prior to the written word. The pencil is *heard* before it is seen, and the pencil is *seen* before it is fulfills its purpose of writing. Thus, hearing and seeing, modes of knowing typically viewed as inferior to writing, are positioned as modes of knowing prior to writing and modes of knowing not captured through or privileged by Western views of literacy and culture.

The third sentence begins a pattern of the speaker wishing to escape writing and its limitations. The contemplation of language and of hybrid modes of knowing predicated upon in-betweenness has begun with the symbol of the pencil, even if the metaphysical element has not yet been introduced: "Paragraphs reduced to one word. A punctuation mark. Then another word, complete as a thought." The speaker probes for a means of expression beyond writing, perhaps even beyond the culture the writing derives from; yet the very act of writing suggests that a word "complete as a thought" is an impossibility. The writer, wishing to transcend language yet prisoner to it, is once again forced to reflect upon his inability to escape his in-betweenness. The writer uses language, demonstrating through written poetry the express inability to escape language yet reinforcing his belonging to language by having no other mode of expression. Thus, the act of writing becomes contemplation of in-betweenness as well.

The first stanza ends with a turn away from the desire to escape the limits of language. The speaker returns to physical location, to a description of his place in the house: "I walk the corridors which might perhaps, I'm not sure, be cooler than the rest of the house. Heat at noon. Heat in the darkness of night." Two motifs are introduced in this line. First, this walking of the corridors is the refusal to enter a designated cultural space and symbolizes his position in-between cultures where contemplation can occur. Second, the confluence of the desire to escape language, to subvert language with other senses such as touch and sight, and to avoid the heat designates

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heat as a motif for cultural location. The corridors, a place of contemplation and in-betweenness, are cool. In the coolness of the corridors, a limiting cultural location can be avoided. Thus, in the final lines of the first stanza, the theme of contemplation on cultural in-betweenness appears. The cool corridors of contemplation are a safe place to imagine death at Kataragama. Cultural location is "heat" and the rooms of the house are too hot to contemplate death because with cultural location one loses one's in-betweenness, the center of finding meaning in life and death.

The recurrent motif of heat is the major motif representing cultural location. At the end of the first stanza, the polar opposites of day and night both suffer from heat. Neither pole can offer sanctity, just as the rooms could not offer sanctity. Only the corridors of the house can. The motif of heat is repeated later in stanza three, as the speaker contemplates escape into the body of a woodpecker. Yet the contemplation ends when the speaker realizes that the woodpecker "may be too hot in the sunlight, it could be a limited life." Inhabiting the woodpecker is representative of the end of contemplation. To become the woodpecker would end the ritual of finding meaning in in-betweenness, and it is only this *contemplation*, not transmigration, that the speaker finds rewarding. Forced to imagine his choice, life as a woodpecker would be "too hot," much as the rooms of the house were in stanza one. Combining the images of stanzas one and three, we can say that the speaker wishes to remain in the coolness of the corridors and not risk the heat of a woodpecker's life.

Stanza six finds the speaker remembering (or imagining) his death in a former life. The heat motif is countered with competing water imagery. This remembering or imagining of a former death is a recovery of cultural location because it places one in the cycle of reincarnation, which is a particular cultural form of spirituality; it is spiritual realism, which is cultural location predicated upon rules and lack of choice. We find that this death scene, too, receives heat imagery. As a scene rendering the speaker's death in a Hindu or Buddhist reincarnation schema, the speaker in this stanza is culturally located and non-Westernized, and some of the heat imagery remains, calling into question the ability of Buddhist or Hindu death rituals to provide solace to the speaker. Thus, the wetness or coolness of contemplation cannot fully displace the heat attributed to the culturally-located dying body:

> "It was water in an earlier life I could not take into my mouth when I was dying. I was soothed the way a plant would be, brushed with a wet cloth [...]. The ache of ribs from too much sleep or fever--bones that protect the heart and breath in battle, during love beside another. Saliva, breath, fluids, the soul. The place bodies meet is the place of escape."

During death in a previous life, he is brushed like a plant, a reference to transmigration and thus cultural location. Moreover, the speaker could not take water when dying a culturally-located death; that is, the speaker could not contemplate in-betweenness and the coolness of stanza one's corridors. Instead, the body is feverish, another occurrence of the heat motif signifying a limiting cultural location through a

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lack of contemplation of in-betweenness. The penultimate sentence equates "saliva, breath, [and] fluids," each of them water-based, with "the soul." Thus, the soul would seem to be linked by symbol and motif to the corridors of stanza one, to the motif of coolness and liquid as the space in-between cultural location that the poem offers repeatedly.

The final sentence of stanza six offers multiple interpretations. The nouns are highly ambiguous. "Place," "bodies," and "escape" are all generic nouns, and the verb "meet" is equally ambiguous because of a subject and direct object that are generic nouns. Are the bodies meeting other bodies, or are the bodies meeting the place of escape? In the second interpretation of this sentence, if the self is seen as in-between cultures, as two bodies, the place these two divided selves meet is named the place of escape. As I have suggested, the place where these plural selves meet is in contemplation of the divided, in-between self. Contemplation is the place where "bodies meet" and create "the place of escape." With this interpretation in mind, even the first interpretation, bodies meeting the place of escape, can be read as plural selves meeting in order to escape, in order to produce a death ritual. Thus, plurality and in-betweeness remain the central factor in the ritual.

Stanza two introduces the woodpecker and finds the speaker returning to the theme of stanza one, the failure of technology: "There is a woodpecker I am enamored of I saw this morning through my binoculars." The theme of stanza two is not the woodpecker, but technology and writing. Only in stanza three will the theme of transmigration finally appear. In stanza two, the speaker admits that "[d]istance is always clearer." The speaker asserts as he did in stanza one that technology is not useful.

This pronouncement on distance returns the speaker to an argument against language: "I no longer see words in focus. As if my soul is a blunt tooth. I bend too close to the page to get nearer to what is being understood." Yet as we discovered in stanza three, technology (electricity, writing, binoculars) is not the only failure. The woodpecker's life may be too hot and a "limited life."

Stanza five finds the speaker returning to animal symbolism. While the woodpecker represented the limits of a culturally-located spiritual system best labeled *spiritual realism*, the water buffalo represent a mythic and hybrid form of animal. The water buffalo, surrounded by water imagery, are not entrenched in the woodpecker's limited life.

> "There is something else. Not just the woodpecker. Ten water buffalo stopped the car. They were being veered from side to side under the sun. The sloshing of their wet hooves in the paddy field that I heard thirty yards away my car door open for the breeze, the haunting sound I was caught within as if creatures of magnificence were undressing and removing their wings."

We see that this contemplation, parallel to stanza two and three's contemplation of life as a woodpecker, paired with useless technology. Previously, it was binoculars

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for the woodpecker. Here, the buffalo stop a car. The buffalo "are veered" by an unknown agent under the sun. We see a return to the motif of wetness and of sound in the line following. The speaker hears the "sloshing of their wet hooves," and it is this "haunting" sound where the speaker places himself for contemplation, reinforcing the value of sound from stanza one. He is "caught within" the sound of their sloshing hooves. The following imagery, of winged buffalo "undressing and removing their wings," changes the buffalo into a mythic, hybrid creature that could not be part of the reincarnational cycle, as opposed to the woodpecker, which is a realistic choice for reincarnation, but lives a hot and limited life. Thus, the winged buffalo is representative of contemplation on in-betweenness. As an unrealistic creature, the water buffalo not only defies the possibility of reincarnation, the winged water buffalo is in-between the physical and metaphysical realms.

Immediately upon telling the reader of the experience of the buffalo in stanza five, the speaker recalls his death in a previous life (stanza six). Stanza seven carries forward stanza six's contemplation of death in human form and revisits the speaker's imagining of transmigration to the woodpecker. As the speaker imagines becoming the woodpecker a second time, we see the reasons for a lack of faith in transmigration: "Will he feel the change in his nature as my soul enters? Will it go darker? Or will I enter as I always do another's nest, in their clothes and with their rules for a particular life." Metaphysical thoughts of transmigration into the woodpecker lead the speaker back to a negative assessment of cultural location, to the "rules for a particular life." Thus, culture of any form is always "rules" and cannot provide spiritual nourishment or death ritual. It is only the contemplation of culture in-betweenness that provides life a meaning and prepares one for death.

Stanza eight, the final stanza, finds the speaker revisiting the water buffalo.

"Or I could leap into knee-deep mud potent with rice. Ten water buffalo. A quick decision. Not goals considered all our lives but, in the final minutes, sudden choice. This morning it was a woodpecker. A year ago the face of someone on a train. We depart into worlds that have nothing to do with those we love. This woman whose arm I would hold and comfort, that book I wanted to make and shape tight as stone--I would give everything away for this sound of mud and water, hooves, great wings ."

After ending stanza seven with the negative assessment of cultural location, the speaker returns to the image of winged water buffalo. The buffalo are once again described through mud and water imagery, and the final image of the poem returns us to the mythic wings. Again, the speaker foregoes the spiritual realism of transmigration represented by the woodpecker. Instead, the speaker imagines meaningful existence only if he moves beyond the limiting realism of a culturally-defined spiritual system exemplified often by reincarnation.

The poem's final image returns to the "sounds" of mud and water, recalling the emphasis on sound before writing in stanza one. The speaker escapes the motifs of

heat and language through the "sound" of mud and water. This sound of mud and water turns quickly to the final image of great wings. This strong final image of buffalo with wings can be read as a final attempt to escape both language (the West) as well as reincarnation (the East). To summarize the poem poetically, the speaker walks the corridors, positioned in a poetic contemplation in-between the house's dominant spaces. Only here can the speaker contemplate death. As he does so, he escapes the Western intrusions of technology and recalls his previous lives of Eastern reincarnation. Yet even the realism of reincarnation does not offer the speaker ritual preparation for death.

After being given the final image of the buffalos' great wings, the poem ends with no punctuation, reinforcing the goal of the speaker in stanza one: "Paragraphs reduced to one word. A punctuation mark." The poem concludes with the image of winged water buffalo followed by no punctuation--an image followed by the disappearance of language conventions. The contemplation has not only been reduced to one word and punctuation mark, but to one image and no punctuation. Through contemplation of the water buffalo, the dissolution of self beyond language (and therefore, potentially beyond culture) is complete.

It should be noted that the speaker does not overtly die, although the image of wings may suggest that the speaker does die into an image at the poem's conclusion. Regardless, it is simply the *pattern of contemplation*, of contemplating the woodpecker, the water buffalo, the face on the train one year ago, that places a focus on the contemplation of one's cultural in-betweenness as the beginning point to create a death ritual.

If the speaker imagined switching places with another on the train a year ago, yet is still alive to write the poem, then it is contemplation that begets ritual in "Death at Kataragama." As Sam Solecki posits

> "the bad faith inevitable in this kind of writing is obvious in the fact that the desire for an unconscious mode of being and unity with the non-human can be described only in language. The poem itself [...] is already complicit in the speaker's failure. What he desires is impossible for any man or woman, and perhaps especially so for a writer." (2003, 178)

However, the process itself of contemplation that imagines escape into an unconscious mode of being, an escape from all cultural longing and belonging, an escape from subjectivity, becomes the preparation of the conscious mind for death. This contemplation produces the poem itself, and past contemplations appear in and structure the poem, illustrating that this process of contemplation and writing is the ritual to reconcile the conscious and the unconscious, and the cultural physical and the metaphysical, that a writer or contemplative soul may have.

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