

Night in The Female Gaol in Kandy

Quiet in the female gaol:
 Sleeping bodies on the floor
 Wrapped in sarees, cloths and towels:
 The gaoler sleeps on her bunk behind her locked door:

Roses grow in the tiny garden
 Where the drain runs with faeces
 And the putter of rain
 Falls on the old tile roof.

The chant from the Dalada Maligawa
 Can be heard softly rising and falling
 before the misty, chilly dawn.

The English clock at St. Andrews
 Still drives the hours
 Long after the colonial age has gone.

Babies sucking milk bowl
 Softly and their mothers shush them
 As they turn in their crowded cell to the wall.

Someone relieves themselves in the pail-
 All quiet in the female gaol.

Death on the Iron Guitar - The Song of a Date with Death (For Mahen Vaithianathan - In Memoriam)

I'm crossing Market Jew Street,
 I'm humming "Death on the Iron Guitar."
 I'm sure you will not die yet
 Though you're twenty years ahead of me -
 I'm living in a dream world,
 I'm humming "Death on the Iron Guitar."

I'm back in the island paradise,
 I'm humming "death on the Iron Guitar."
 There are riots in the streets, the rattle of AK-47s,
 And you're having curfew parties,
 But I'm sure you'll not die yet-
 Though you're smoking more than a battalion of guns;
 I'm humming "Death on the Iron Guitar."

There are corpses in the dried-up paddy fields, bits of
 bodies burning on tyres by the roadsides,
 You're coughing more than laughing now;
 I'm humming "Death on the Iron Guitar"-
 But surely you won't die yet?
 Though soldiers on both sides
 Always think they're winning-
 They're all living in a dream world,
 Singing "Death on the Iron Guitar"

We're dropping you off at Charles Circus
 In the old Morris Oxford estate car;
 We're on our way to a death-bed;
 I'm humming "Death on the Iron Guitar"
 But I still think you won't die yet
 Though you're drunker than a stand-up comic:
 I'm living in a dream world-
 It's the last time I'll see you (in this life):

I'm smoking cigarettes in Camberwell,
 I'm humming "Death on the Iron Guitar",
 But still I can't believe that you'll die yet
 Though a beloved voice from a long-distance
 Tells me you're breathing pure oxygen
 Fed through a mask-
 Your lungs, it seems, have turned to ash:
 Was this our dream world,
 This death on the iron guitar ?

You died on a darkening Bak poya
 (death on the iron guitar)
 Your mother's wall clock must have chimed a carillon
 From the house behind:
 The incessant rains filled up the reservoirs-
 There'll be power enough now to drive
 The whole nation's dream world:
 Death on the Iron Guitar.

In twenty-four hours you were cremated,
 The hindu way.
 Not much to burn your case-
 A sunken body, some bones, a moustache,
 A set of black teeth, a stout heart;
 But this refrain must have sounded somewhere in Kanatte-
 "Death on the Iron Guitar"

What was the nature of this dream world-
 Where I was crossing Market Jew Street
 And knew you would not die yet
 Though you were twenty years ahead of me
 And I was humming and humming,
 Like one possessed, this single line
 That just wouldn't go away-
 "Death, death, death on the iron guitar?"

Jane Russel