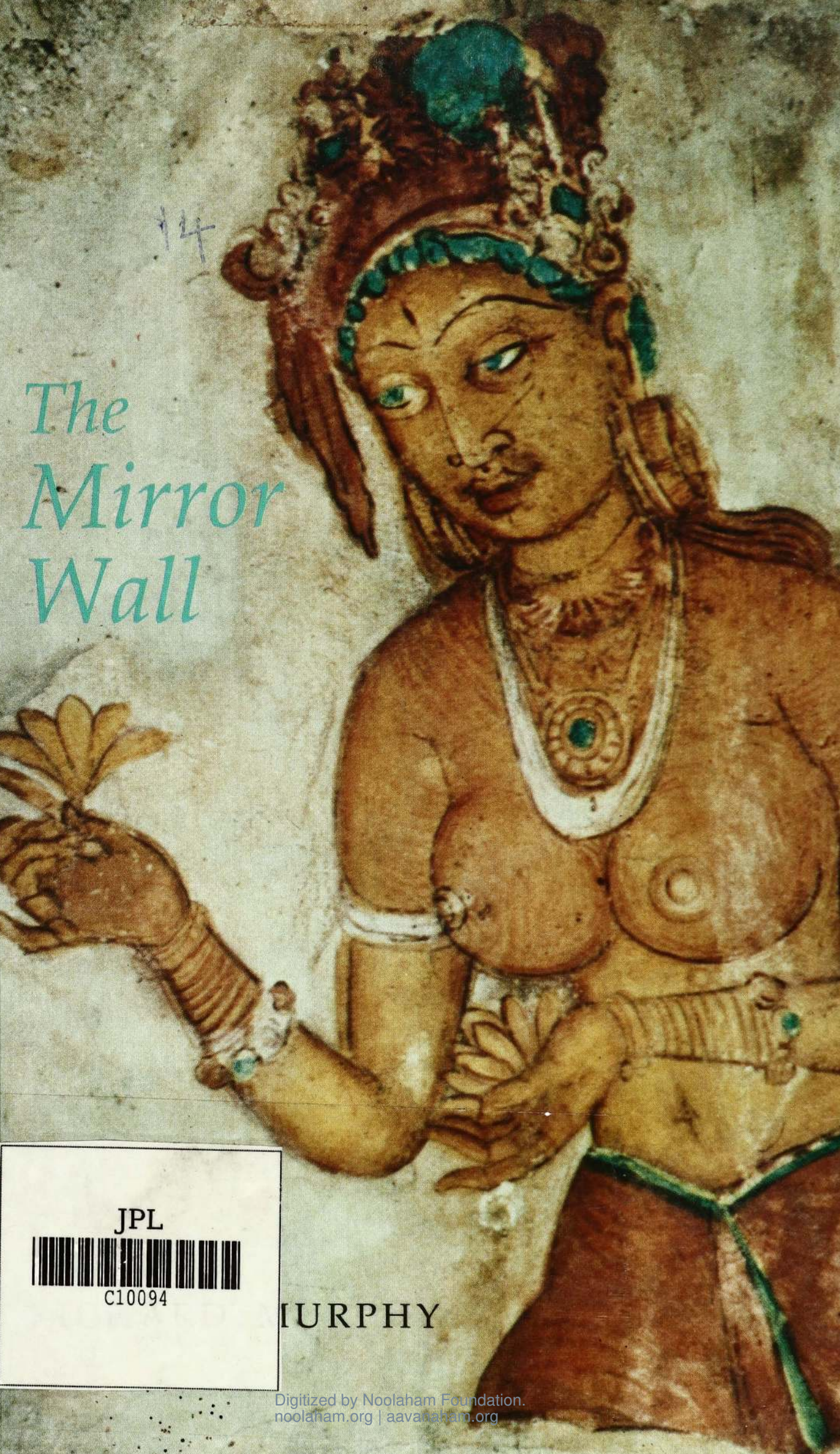

The Mirror Wall

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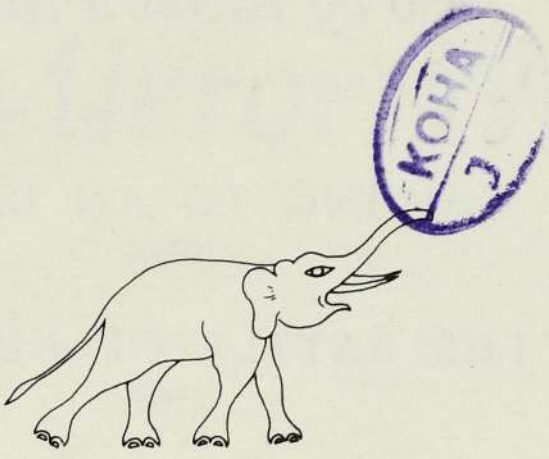

THE MIRROR WALL

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SAILING TO AN ISLAND
(1963)

THE BATTLE OF AUGHRIM
(1968)

HIGH ISLAND
(1974)

THE PRICE OF STONE
(1985)

NEW SELECTED POEMS
(1989)

About Richard Murphy

RICHARD MURPHY:
POET OF TWO TRADITIONS
Maurice Harmon, editor
(Wolfhound Press, 1978)

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RICHARD MURPHY

The Mirror Wall

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Acknowledgements

The Government of Sri Lanka granted me permission in 1987 to use copyright material by the late Professor Senarat Paranavitana in writing these poems. I acknowledge this debt with gratitude. *Sigiri Graffiti* by S. Paranavitana was published in two volumes by the Oxford University Press for the Government of Ceylon in 1956, and reprinted at the Government Press in Colombo in 1983.

I am thankful to Nihal Fernando for the four photographs of the frescoes (pp. xvii-xx), and to Luxshmanan Nadaraja for the sample of a Sinhala poem written on the Mirror Wall. The cover photograph of a cloud nymph, painted on a rock at Sigiriya in the 5th century, is reprinted by permission of UNESCO.

The lotus, sapu flower, jasmine, bo leaf, lion, elephant, swan, makara and other Sri Lankan emblems were drawn by Mandalika Manjusri.

I am grateful to several writers who helped me to work on these poems in Sri Lanka. Ashley Halpé, Professor of English at Peradeniya University, introduced me to the *Sigiri Graffiti*, showed me some of his own versions and encouraged me to persevere. Anuradha Seneviratne, Professor of Sinhala at Peradeniya, gave me instruction on the Old Sinhala texts, including their background, and critical advice on my adaptations. Senake Bandaranayake, Professor of Archaeology at

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Also, I am grateful to the editors of *Grand Street* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, in which many of these poems first appeared; and to the editors of the *New York Review of Books*, in which the poem called 'Sri Lanka' was published.

The British High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, David Gladstone, and his wife April, sponsored a performance of these poems, with music by Lalanath de Silva, for two hundred guests at Westminster House, Colombo, on 24 March 1988.

Finally, a word of thanks to my native country. My work on *The Mirror Wall*, requiring long visits to Sri Lanka, was continuously and generously supported by Aosdána, the Arts Council and the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Republic of Ireland.

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Contents

The numbers in square brackets refer to the Old Sinhala songs in *Sigiri Graffiti* by S. Paranavitana.

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Sri Lanka

Being nearly heart-shaped made me seem a ham
  On early spice trade navigators' charts
  Tinctured with cinnamon, peppered with forts,
To be eaten up under a strong brand name
Like Taprobane, Serendib, Tenarisim –
  Copper-palmed lotus island slave resorts –
  And I succumbed to lordly polished arts
That cut me down to seem a white king's gem,
A star sapphire tear-drop India shed
  On old school maps, a lighthouse of retorts
Flashing from head to head. My leonine blood
Throbbed wildly when resplendent freedom came
  Mouthing pearl tropes with Pali counterparts,
Exalted, flawed; and made me seem as I am.

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Preface

Much of my happy childhood was spent in Ceylon, where my father was the last British Mayor of Colombo. After a gap of fifty years, I returned to Sri Lanka, and found the inspiration for these poems. It came from songs written in Old Sinhala during the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries. The original holographs remain on the curving, parapet wall of a footpath half way up the rock fortress of Sigiriya in the central province. The wall is about a hundred metres long, and over two metres high. Incised with metal styles in the polished plaster, the songs relate to mysterious, "golden" women in frescoes painted on the undulating rock above this "mirror wall", who seem to be dancing in the clouds. Twenty of these portraits have survived since the end of the 5th century.

Sigiriya, or *Sihigiri* in Old Sinhala, means 'Lion Rock': and the Sinhala people are the 'lion' people, mythically descended from a lion who raped an Indian princess. From some directions, the rock resembles a crouching lion that has lost its head: and from others, a massive lingam, the symbol of Shiva. Rising 600 feet above the forest, tanks and paddy fields of the peneplain, it stands on the island's main water parting, where the rivers that flow east into the Bay of Bengal part from those that flow west into the Indian Ocean.

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Sigiriya was fortified by a king called Kassapa or Kasyapa, who reigned there from AD 477 to 495, the only king of Lanka to have done so. The *Mahāwamsa*, an ancient Theravada Buddhist chronicle written in Pali, accused Kassapa of slaying his father by having him sealed up in a niche inside a wall: and said that he chose Sigiriya 'through fear', because the rock 'is difficult of ascent for human beings. He cleared [the land] round about, surrounded it with a wall and built a staircase in the form of a lion. Thence it took its name... Then he built there a fine palace, worthy to behold, like another Ālakamandā and dwelt there like Kuvera.'

Kuvera was the god of wealth in the Hindu pantheon, and Ālakamandā, or Alakā in Sanskrit, was the city he occupied on the mythical Mount Kailāsa in the Himalayas. The Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa, who lived a century before Kassapa, alludes to Kailāsa as 'the mirror for goddesses', and to Alakā as adorned with paintings he compares to the cloud's rainbow. Four of the Sinhala songs refer to the women in the frescoes as *asaran*, from *apsaras* in Sanskrit, the cloud nymphs who frequented Kailāsa. One song suggests they were the king's five hundred wives. Were they 'stuck to the rock' as offerings to Kuvera or the Lion or the local mountain god? Perhaps their function was to ensure sufficient rainfall to grow rice in this dry zone: rain was sometimes regarded as the semen of the gods.

After Kassapa was defeated in battle by his half-brother, Sigiriya was abandoned as a royal residence, but greatly revered as a place of secular pilgrimage. People were drawn there from all over Sri Lanka and

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southern India for the next seven hundred years. Eventually the ruins were smothered in jungle, until the site was opened up in the last century.

Some of the writers signed their names on the wall, declaring their rank, profession and place of residence. They were members of a feudal nobility and its entourage; officials, merchants, clerks and Buddhist monks. Only two of the authors professed to be 'poets'. At least twelve poems were written by women. Monks had occupied Sigiriya centuries before Kassapa's reign, and remained for centuries thereafter. In some of their puritanical songs, they condemned the fresco nymphs as faithless wives or prostitutes or dancing girls. Theravada Buddhism never encouraged erotic art or sensual passion.

The women in the pictures were seen by the writers from various contradictory points of view, but never rearing children. War, famine, plague, or what we might call reality, did not enter into their stylised world. Nor was it necessary to describe what could be seen on the spot. In Old Sinhala, as in Sanskrit poetry, it was more important for writers to celebrate and affirm their culture than to be original or subversive. No song implies that Kassapa was a parricide, though several argue about his wives' behaviour after his death. There is no definitive version of why the women are on the rock, or what they are doing, or who they are: and the songs grow from this fertile mystery.

Called *gi* in Sinhala, the lyrics were sung, perhaps with vina, flute and drums, in the gallery under the portraits where they were written. There are poems

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about love, rejection and the separation of lovers; satires and complaints; joyful, erotic celebrations; and rueful ironies. Much of the writing is light verse or vers de société. There is at least one prose inscription, which says: *I am Budal, I came in company and saw Sihigiri. Many people who saw [Sihigiri] have written verses. I therefore did not write one.*

The forms of the *gi* are syllabic: usually 38 to 43 syllables, divided into two lines, each of which contains a "breath", or caesura, after 9, 10, or 11 syllables. An English quatrain could match this, but Sinhala verse has no stresses. End rhymes are rare, though internal rhyming, assonance and alliteration frequently occur. Some short Sinhala words can have several meanings that deepen the ambiguity, or the irony of a lyric.

A few of my poems are versions that keep close to the syllabic count and meaning of their Old Sinhala sources. But more often I use a variety of freer forms to elaborate images and ideas evoked by the sources; to bring in modern voices; to include some description and context; or to combine material from several songs. My sources are among the 685 songs that were transcribed, edited, translated and introduced by Senarat Paranavitana in his *Sigiri Graffiti*, a two volume masterpiece of Sinhala scholarship, which informed and inspired my work.

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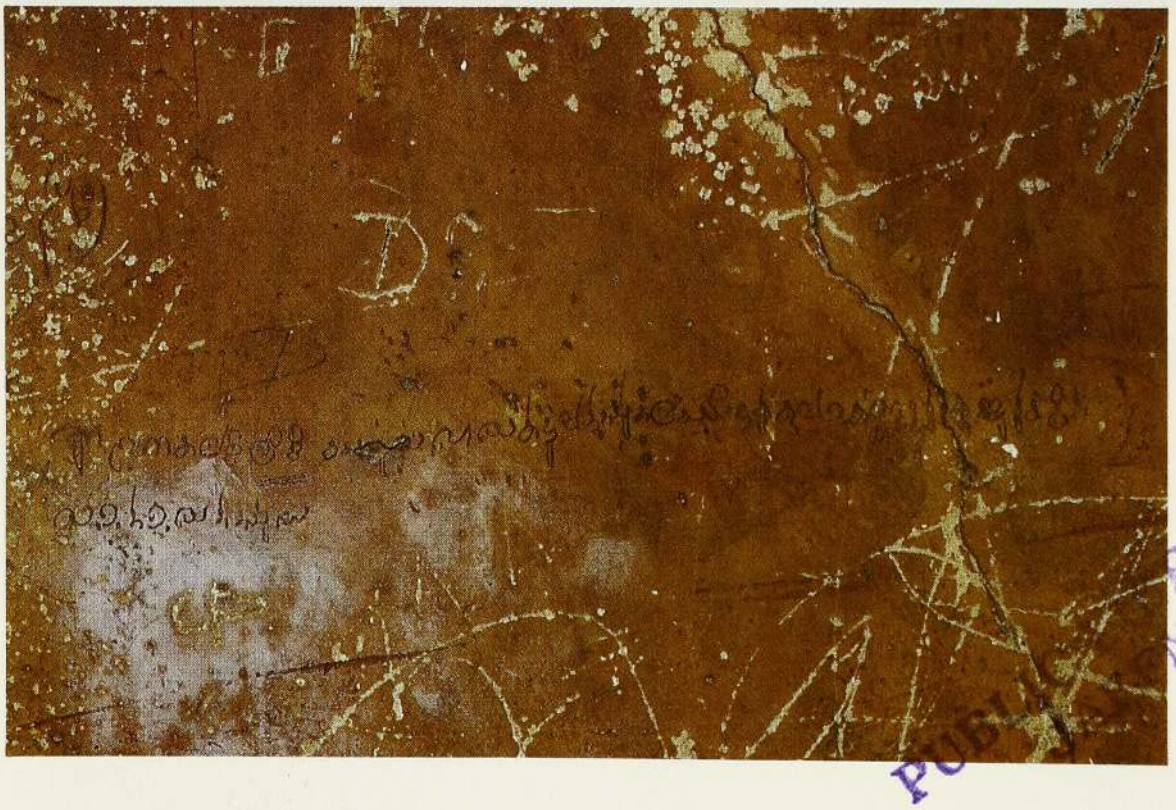

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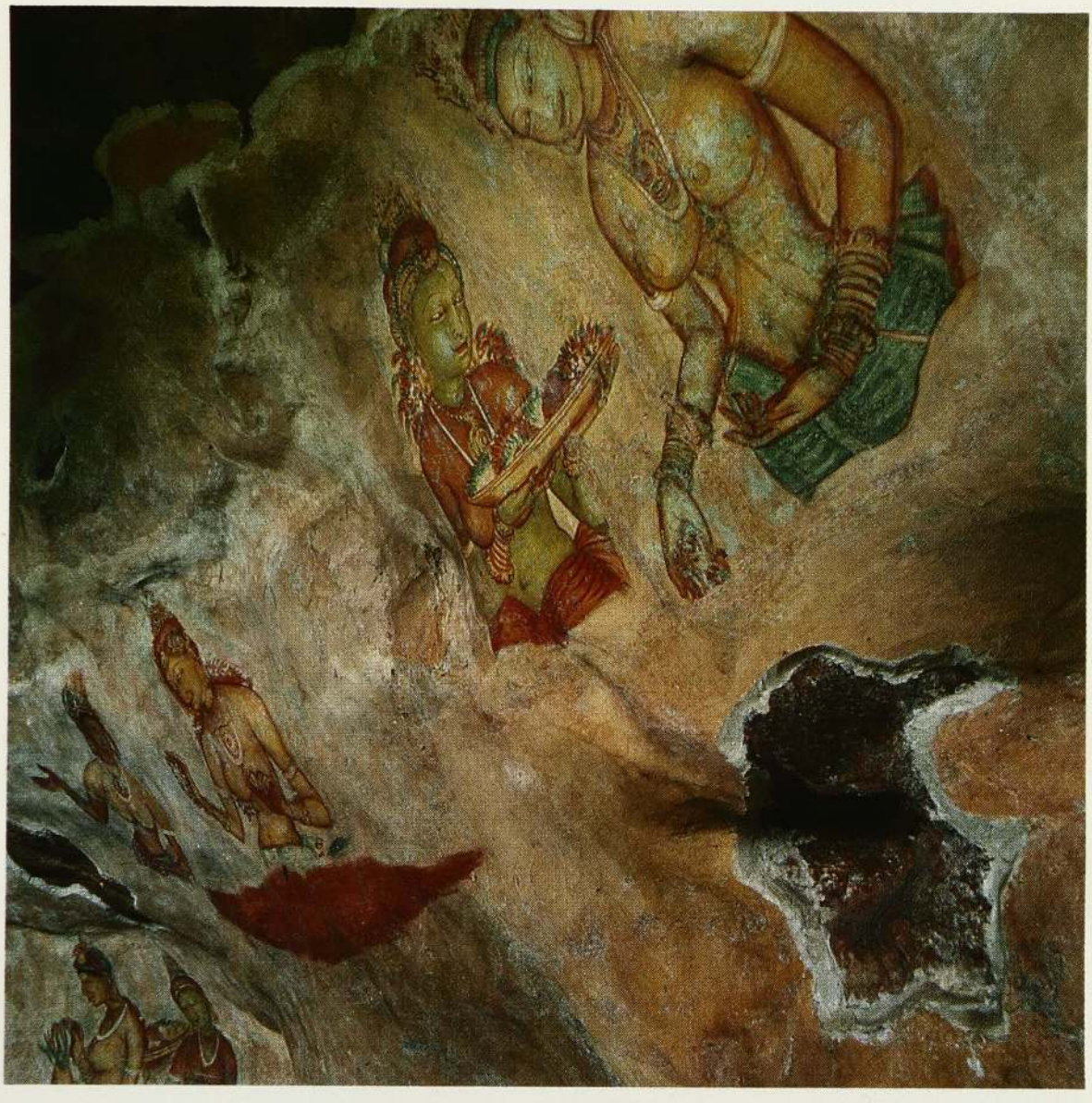

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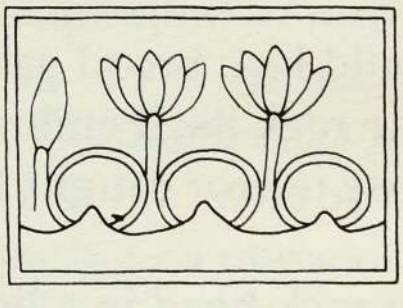
Invocation

All you feel on the Lion Rock won't come
by breathing heavily.
Take up a style

And let the Rain Girls give you airs to lift
songs from the scores
that pierce the Mirror Wall.



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KASSAPA

Perhaps the king, whose name evoked the sun,
Riding his elephant, under a pearl umbrella,
Through parched rice-fields on the dry zone plain,

Had seen this rock aspiring from the earth
To penetrate the clouds loafing in heaven:
And put five hundred of his virgin brides,

Dressed in cascades of jewellery, to make
A splash on the summit, and entice the gods
To cast their semen on the ground as rain:

Then shone here, as the god of wealth, supreme
In rice and gems, going about on three legs,
Devising arts to give the gods sublime

Erections that would last: broad galleries
Of golden girls the rock itself embraced
Inside a wall whose mirror caught their souls:

And sheathed the rock-head in a lion mask
To father a strong race, out of whose mouth
At festivals he made great fountains pour.

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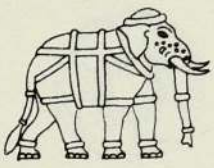

Falling and falling
through feverish jungle
with leeches sucking our blood,
pythons dangling from creepers
over the footpath,
leopards in ebony trees
looking us in the eyes,
and herds of wild elephants
trumpeting on our tracks,

We found our way exalted
by this massive monolith,
and began as we climbed
to love each other better,
leaping into fountain tanks
to quench fiery thirst.
Our thanks to the Lion
who protects Sri Lanka
for sparing us one glorious day.

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Climbed up the Lion Rock
and met the King himself:

Bricked alive in the mountain
with a lion face of brick.

His power house odour
induced feverish sweat.

We stepped through his open jaws
and came out on top,

Where earth's wheel is joined
to the great wheel of heaven:

A sky palace water tower
whose old courses cracked.

His rain girl collection filled
the rock's driest hollow.

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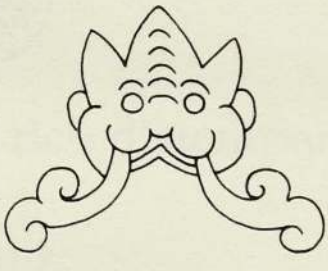
Coming up the mountain track
singing a song
I never got a word
from the golden girls
kept here by their lover
endlessly apart:

so I poked around the Lion Rock
and was stunned.



Look, my darling, how the people
Who chatter to each other
Lightening the hard way up

Are drawn without a word
To a woman whose beauty
Irradiates the silence of the rock.

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The king's palace rock is delectable –
or so I had always heard,
and a picture had formed in my mind.
Now on the spot. I think I will need
more eyes than the stars
for my mind not to go completely blank.

All over the Lion Rock
the king had his women
fixed up as water nymphs
pretending this was heaven:

And hared off to look
for salvation as a turtle
seeking throughout the ocean
for a yoke to fit his neck.

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'I'm dying,'
the king thought,
a while before
having to leave this world.
He couldn't take
his wives,
all tarted up in rich distemper.
'Hang on,'
he jeered at them,
'and fuck the rock!'

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Who got angry,
you or your husband,
(the same word can mean *lord*),

In a song by Mital,
'slovenly written in script
attributable to the ninth century'?

Were you happy climbing
to the mountain top,
or dragged by your hair?

'The writing is blurred
by the weathering of the plaster,
and scribbles of later visitors.'

You leapt down, they said.
Mital was not sure:
you could have been thrown.

Did you dance on the terrace
that hot blustery day
too close to the precipice,

While the king, smoking ganja,
sat calm as a lotus
on a solid rock-crystal divan?

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Mital does not mention,
because Yagi verse is too spare,
your opulent jewellery:

The oval aquamarines
above and between your breasts,
the ponderous gold ear-rings,

And armlets adorned
with cats' eyes and chrysoberyls
which kept you chained;

Or the rope of pearls
hung round your neck enslavingly.
He refers obliquely

To a tree called *kolomba*,
(a bad, or a grieving, mother?),
able to survive

Teetering on the rock-edge
with roots going far down the cliff
clinging to every moist crevice.

He leaves you in his poem
branching out and blossoming
as you fall to this day.

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When spoken to
never to speak
a word to anyone
and to keep to our rock.

This irrevocable oath
they all had to take
before the king's death
when those forest girls were stuck

On the mountain, skin dyed
to look golden. Hard luck!
It was a royal
Old Sinhalese trick,

Making a political
pun to lock
the gold girls up in a vocable
meaning *word* and *rock*:

Letting the public try
by seductive lyric
to break them free
of their graphic mental block.

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Longing
to sing
and play
music
she'd brought the lute
up to her shoulder
when
the king's death
struck a chord

and being as good as gold
didn't she strike the lute
to smithereens.

Her loose appearance may give offence,
But I'll stand up for her innocence.

When told that her prince was dead
She tore off her flowery tiara.

The blossom in her hand isn't beckoning:
It happened to fall from her head.

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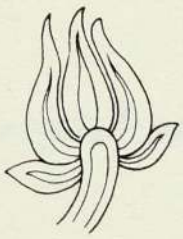

They deck you
with love-making flowers
arrange your hair
to fall in seductive tresses
put waterlilies
and a sapu bud in your hand

Now
fair girl
you are ready
for them to attach you
to the dark rock
for ever

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Some of the figures
look painfully deformed:
all their lustre
has long been dimmed.

These were pliant girls
who had a good time
in their time
when somebody was fond of them.

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Good Luck!

I love to climb up here at dawn, and stand
looking at lotus flowers
blossoming from a cut stone mountain pond:
while a gentle breeze, carrying a scent
from nowhere to nowhere
comes across
and overpowers my mind.

I am Lord Agboy, I wrote this verse.

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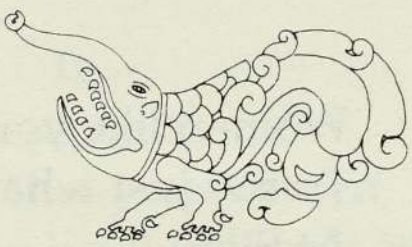
Adorable mountain girl
With your dark blue waterlily eyes
And red-hot hand bearing a lotus
You took my mind
Away from another person
By sweet brute force.



You who remain
fresh on the rock
may think:

'In our endless youth
surviving here
we've never met

a man we could love
who did not die
when slain.'

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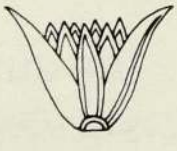
With her hair tied up in flowery ringlets
And a blue tilak mark on her forehead,
The most hunted gold creature on the mountain
Catches you with her eyes in a perfect snare.

Women like you enable people
To say just what they think:
At Sigiri
You compelled my hair to bristle,
My whole body rose up thrilled.



Does the blue waterlily or the purple lotus
Resemble the motionless iris in your eyes?
How distant is your vision?
Is our life still comparable to your still life?

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In
Your eyes
The lustre that pours down
From a candle in a bowl of jewels blazes.
The stillness in that flame can't be contrived.
Your nature is well shown
To be divine.

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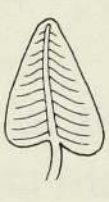
Your eyes
have turned into waterlilies:
beautiful,
but I can't rejoice.

I was not good enough
in my past life
for you to grant me
a word in this.



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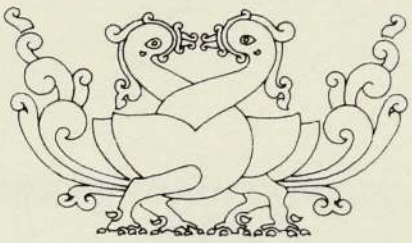

Eyebrows midnight blue.
A swan
Is mooning down
The milky lake of her breast.

Her waist
Is a mere waterdrop.
Luminous rainbow fish
Laze in the coral of her lips.

And here she lies
Revealing herself
As a goddess
Confronting you now.

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No, don't look at her!
Let's go away.
The golden figures
With wet-nurse breasts
Should be hacked off.
Captivating men
On a flaking wall
High up the hill
They are unspeakable!

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I am Friar . . .
(*the name is blurred by weathering . . .*)

Picture a palm tree
with bunches of golden nuts
full of milk
always ready
in a hundred small ways to be used.

How much better it will thrive in a clump
on a low stretch of water
than high and dry on its own out of reach.

Instead of you flaunting
your golden bosoms
like bunches of prostitutes
on this ruinous wall
you should be put in a neighbourhood museum.

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I'm Bati
a young widow
climbing Sigiriya
looking for words
to stitch into a song.

No song of mine
purled on moonstone
will gratify ladies
who use their long eyes
to sew people up.

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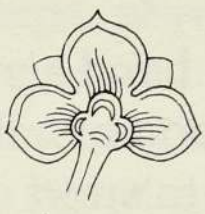

Beyond looking brilliant
Have they nothing in mind?
You men call them faithless.
Didn't your gold brushwork
Make them what they are?

A woman wrote this for women
Sealed in the rockface
As gems on show to the crowd.
Their star sapphire eyes
Look far too bright to be touched.

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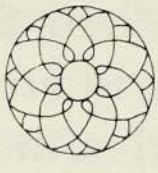
I was in paradise
where nymphs in spotless health
Cavorted on the generous clouds
to please the god of wealth.

Up jumped my hand across
a bamboo moral hurdle
In a rich desire to sport
with the pearl string of a girdle.



Her hand
is given like water
to those thirsting for love
that will last.

The eye
she cast
when given my love
was dry as blue paint on old mortar.

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Superlative make-up artist,
please tone down
the blues of your lily-petal eyes,
and close
the gem boutique of your mouth
full of fake pearls.
Stop posing on the cliff-top:
show more heart!

Yes
She is beautiful
And may have once done good
But by not following the correct path
Because she was lacking in faith
She cannot warm to people
So keeps to herself
Her almost
Burnt out
Heart

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She's planting
the seeds
of a marketable
gingered melon smile:

Chatting
with a voice
that squeezes me a juice
labelled 'keep cool':

Slitting
her eyes
to let me savour
two segments of blue shell:

Pouring
on my flash
of burning hope
her laugh like perfumed oil.

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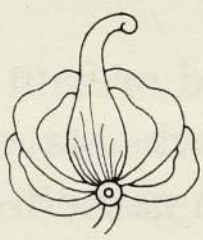
From Hunagiri Temple
I've come with all I possess:
Needle, fan, begging bowl
And my robe as a novice.

A person much talked about
Lives up in that cave, whoring.
Be wakeful in thought:
Guard the door of hearing!

She spreads a broad grin
Round a soul she's devouring.
Terrible thing to have seen.
I can't stop shuddering.



No! You must not believe
Those beauties you can see
In that sheltered grotto
Are happy or good or true.

Remember
The world is passing away
The world is suffering
The world has no identity.

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Just let me creep away
if I get this wrong:
scratch out my name
on the wall at Sigiri!

I'm Dayal Bati, a woman
visiting the rock,
this great lady's home;
wrapping a song for her.

'What seed or fruit
did those who stayed on here
succeed in gathering
from the rays of the moon?

To whom did the beam
she shone in the morning
not bring a ray
of mounting happiness?'

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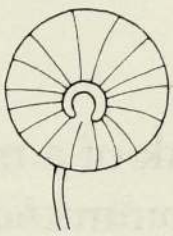

Does a good lover
have to become
the lover of goodness
in a noble woman?

The tide in the ocean
cannot stand still:
when the full moon has risen
it must rise.

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She stopped me feeling sad.

Then took off
to the rugged peak of a mountain precipice.
Joined a happy commune.
Everlasting, indeed!

Why can't I simply fall asleep?

Thinking endless thoughts
about someone you madly desire
can become not very becoming.

It would be nice to stop craving
that one with lascivious eyes
and to think of her as your sister.

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The song of Lord Sirina of Digalavana

My Lord,
the Cloud!
I worship you
for bringing seed
from heaven
to the earth.

Go to the house
of a woman
whose heart is broken:
her tongue and lips
are dry
with despair.

Rain healing
compassion
to restore her love:
speak to her,
keep speaking,
make it flow!

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Pure as the hare with spots
mindfully drawn
by the king of the gods
on the mandala of the moon,

I wish you could stay
for a thousand years as you were
that singular day
you starred in my mental sphere.

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I looked
and my wish was granted:

Years of longing anxiously
ended at Sigiri in joy.

The girl I'd wanted
was planted in front of me

Immovable as the rock
turning her body into gold.

She couldn't speak:
there was nothing I could say.

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The virtue of this breeze,
enriched with jasmine,
giving pleasure to us all,

Comes from the women,
pictured as lianas
bending under the opulent

Burdens of their breasts,
who linger on the edge
of the precipitous rock,

Faithful to their lover
in endless separation,
eyes fixed on the road,

While dancing in reflections
along the mirror wall
waving yellow yak-tail fans.

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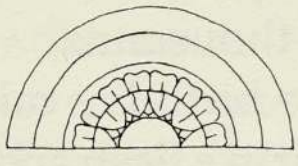
Doesn't the Sanskrit "apsaras",
Going between the waters of the clouds,
Describe these nymphs as they are painted here
For born lovers, like us?

O milkmaids of the cosmos
Take me as I come within your scope
Non-violently: for I will disturb you no more
Than a breeze trembling in moonlight.



The moon rose
when I was on the mountain
looking closely
at those eyes like a forest gazelle's.

Climbing down
I resolved to lure them
nightly to gleam
across my memory's water-hole.

Their small elliptical
dying-of-thirst flame
made all seem dark
until this poem came to light.

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The wet monsoon
came to us in a thunderstorm
bursting with relief.

Clay pots and brass bowls
overflowed with drips
from leaks in broken roofs.

Hundreds and thousands
of trees like birthday cake candles
were lit in a flash and blown out.

Tuna and seer-fish
got whirled into the sky
and landed among spice gardens.

A curlew felt cheated
and left the country
filing a wretched complaint.

From the summit of parched hills
waterfalls roared
like tomtoms beaten in temples.

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In our cots at night we crowed
when firefly swarms kept bringing
miniscule buds of light.

You, with your eyes half closed
as a nymph on the Lion Rock
stirred up these airs.

If we'd known the secret
of sapu flowers at your fingertips
would it have helped?

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Wow! That girl on the mountain
has bound in Sri Lankan style
your eyes and your soul.

How? By showing you her breasts
curved as a Sinhala "O"
swanning on the mirror wall.

Bow to their beauty, as they float by,
drunk for a thousand years
on the nectar of lotuses.

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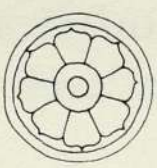
O no! Don't go from the mountain side
now that I've just come.

Stay as my nymph, while I still adore you,
in poor shape as I am.

You're my waterlily woman on the rocks,
my mother in a rain-cloud,

My mango sweetheart tongue to tongue,
and my lightning rod in bed.



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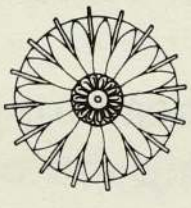
If you examine the way
women were poised here embracing the rock
and how they are now dropping down
off the cruel stony face,

You may from this angle
notice a necklace loosening its thread
and follow with your eyes
a scattering of pearls.



A melon-pip smile
pops out from under
a dense thundercloud of hair,

Sending the shivers
through flowers that cling
to its wavering tendrils.

After being struck twice
by sheet lightning I saw
a housewife's face closing up.

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Becoming attached
to one of these colourful
Wallflower girls
who have such fetching eyes,

Is like being stitched
into the body of a poem
With a gaping wound
that won't heal in your mind:

Or like jewelling the hook
that's used by a mahout
To master an elephant
and jabbing it in your head.

How can that dancer,
whose eyes half shut
are like slender greeny carp,
cool our passion

With garlands hung
as fishnets drying
on the coral pink
atolls of her breasts?

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As a woman I'll gladly
sing for these women
who are unable to speak.

You bulls come to Sigiri
and toss off little lovesongs
making a big hullabaloo.

Not one has given us
a heart-warming sip
of rum and molasses.

Maybe none of you thought
we women could have lives
of our own to get through.

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He kept coming back to look:
it was her colour
that struck him.

She was black,
and stood out
on the mountain

With golden girls
embracing her
as a sister.

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Once he'd imagined them
how could the portrait painter cope
with his own inextinguishable
desire to depict

These joyful brides of the mountain
inside whose formless dark
their waists, slender as lightning,
glitter and connect?

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Crushed
by ill treatment
she had to change her life.

Her mouth
tasted of ashes
from the burning in her breast.

Her eyes
had no more tears to shed:
she was written off as a woman.

They turned her
into a damsel with a tail
as pliable as the lash of a whip.

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I am Kitala: I wrote this.

Whoever it was who wrote
on the mirror wall
at this high level
will never be known.

Yet another guy came
and improperly boasted
the winning song
had been written by him.

A gorgeous peacock alighted
in a forest glade
and the dance
was joined by a cuckoo.

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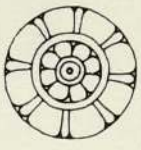
His ploy is to make devices
to home himself in
on your heart.

He bad-mouths honey
as 'floral effluent'
to take it from the plant.

And he reviles
as 'droppings in a cess-pit'
the dearest gems you've got.



This act of his
in sewing up words
he thought was making poetry.

He sat down and wrote
on the reflective wall
plainly of things we could see.

With no nectar in the sound
no quicksilver at the core
it can't be poetry.

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When I approach the guarded
community of rich widows
jangling their chunky gold armlets
on this jungle rock,

My breathing gives me trouble.
I feel it's much harder
to pull off a poem
if one is awe-inspired.

Women,
please wave your hands!

One who values my poem
may not exist;
but I'm human.

I've seen the tender moon
in the month of May.

Don't reject me!

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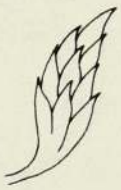

The subtle and ethereal
fluid of the sky
reflected in the earthy
pond of the mirror wall

Is as good to look at
as a beautiful young bride:
and the women, who are married
in this picture, act

As if blissfully drunk
on the flow of nectar
from songs that reflect their
beauty, don't you think?

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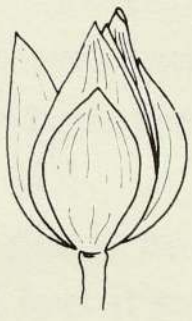

The message I received
moved me as if a swan
floating across ruffled
water had calmed it down.

Love was revived in me
as if on a lotus bed
a honey-swollen bee
had opened bud after bud.

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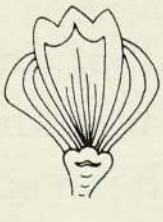
A nectar-soaked bee
tickled pink
came out of his shell
and tossing about
with no restraint
got deeply into a flower.

Humming all day long
in her short gummy filaments,
captive to joy
that never stopped,
by sunset he was biting
the lotus to let him out.



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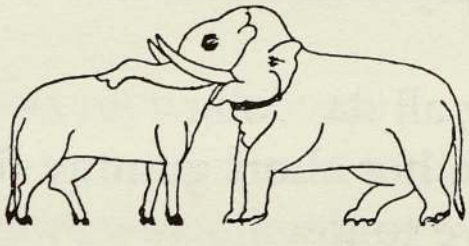
No,
We do not know
In that empire of the past,
How the heat never made you pour with sweat:

Nor,
When you go
On journeys that last centuries,
How you still keep your courage, and look neat.



'Do we know why that gorgeous creature
lived in a forest community
at that time?'

'At that time
I guess no guy was around like you
with whom she could have some communication.'

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The good luck and joy
said to be found
by mounting Sigiri
require a lot of sweat.

Besides these tiptop women
are there not
enough superb bodies
laying on the ground?

While swans are making a smooth passage
from glittering water
to a thicket of lotuses in bud,

A woman picking flowers in the reservoir
is taking my attention
to herself alone: as if I'd come

Through forest to the rock that holds high
our resplendent tradition
merely to tumble into a lotus bed.

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After a poem by Governor Nakka,
the Superintendent of Slaves of the Pandyan King.

When our Lion Rock,
who had offered sacrifice
by shouldering the city
of thirty Hindu gods
with passionless tranquillity,

Asked the Himalayan
King of Mountains,
peaked as a lotus cup
full of gems and gold,
'was heaven too much for you to bear?'

Meru's disgruntled
quakings and eruptions
which had unsettled paradise
were suddenly
blown out like a flame.

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I don't believe
there's a ford in paradise
or a dhobi's shed
where clothes could be washed.

Water seeps
through the porous rock
leaving little enough
to make the fountains work.

So why does a washerwoman
climb and mingle
with the golden caste
on the sparkling mountain?

She's found a red stain
on the numinous cloud
surrounding the loins
of the king's youngest bride.

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Sigiriya, 11 January 1987

Early this morning
I walked on the ramparts
and came across lotuses,

A playful flotilla
becalmed on the moat
hauling white sails down,

As warm rain was falling:
each leaf collecting in the palm
of my hand as a child

Drops that scatter and split
like mercury: held very still
they pool and unite.

*

We were lightly fanned
by a friendly wind
with a scent of jasmine

Around an octagonal pond
where the king could recline
in his pleasure ground

Backed by a huge rock lingam
watering a lotus bed
whenever it rained:

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We could see our reflections
blossoming from the mud
in fragrant, flamboyant air.

*

The freshness we found
near the cobra hood cave
on white marble steps

Going up to the clouds
came as kindness from someone
who usually makes our blood boil:

All the better when we stood
above the gallery walkway
between rock and mirror wall,

And watched a transparent
drop-curtain of rain
coming down from the gods

By drip-channels grooved
in the overhanging cliff:
and saw the violent green

Jungle of the country
from this high point of love
diffused through a purifying screen.

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If happiness could come by going away
Why did our going away not come at once?
One of the women signalled 'now's your chance',
But gave this writer such a happy glance
That soon she was complaining bitterly
'It's come to look as if they're going to stay.'

'You won't remember this among foreigners
When you've become a foreigner yourself.'

'To think of leaving her, and going away,
Feels like trying to run uphill in a dream.'

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Maybe when royalty had gone
And this unhappy girl stayed on,

Ignorant passers by
Insulted her cruelly.

As she'd gone with him all the way
Why was it wrong for her to stay?

On our way
we're scribbling you a line,
dear girls of Ceylon.

Forgive
our coming in such force
to take you in.

Now that we're leaving,
is there a better
way to go?

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Entangle,
while you sort out words engraved
as cowries on this mirror
in your mind,

The deep
blue flower that has a clitoris
on a creeper climbing up
a lingam,

With a bright
yellow flower caught in loose hair
rambling along a fragrant hedge
in moonlight:

And remember,
at the last milking of the day
living in Old Sinhala
poetry,

The loving embrace
of a dark young waterlily girl
with a queen whose breasts are like
gold king coconuts,

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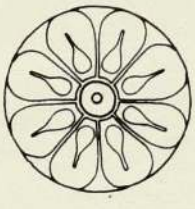
Coming
together just as daylight
is sinking into the warm ocean
of night.



They came here, looked around, and went,
With this karmic picture
Etched upon their minds.

But they couldn't stop their hands
Wanting to touch
As they climbed and stumbled down.

You salacious people,
Keep your hands off the images!
Don't go giving each breast a rub.

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Richard Murphy is one of Ireland's most admired and accomplished poets. Born in Co. Galway in 1927, he spent much of his childhood in Ceylon, where his father was the last British Mayor of Colombo.

Since the publication of his first book, *Sailing to an Island*, in 1963, Murphy has received much praise for such qualities as his 'sureness of direction in the art and a poised and appeased self-knowledge' (Seamus Heaney).

He has published five other books with Faber including *The Battle of Aughrim* (1968), *High Island* (1974) and *The Price of Stone* (1985). The publication of *The Mirror Wall* coincides with the appearance from Faber of Richard Murphy's *New Selected Poems* (1989).

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POETRY BOOK SOCIETY TRANSLATION AWARD

Half way up the remote fortress of Sigiriya in Sri Lanka is a long wall of polished plaster, with mysterious golden women painted on the rock above, who seem to be dancing in the clouds. Twenty of these frescoes have survived since the end of the fifth century.

The Mirror Wall is covered with graffiti: hundreds of songs relating to these cloud nymphs, composed by nobles, merchants, travellers and Buddhist monks during the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries. These songs or lyrics were sung, probably with vina, flute and drums, in the gallery beneath the portraits, where the words were written on the wall: love poems, satires and curses; happy, witty, ironical and sad celebrations of beautiful, erotic, festive and sometimes painful experiences.

Richard Murphy's poems were inspired by the songs of the Mirror Wall. Some keep close to the intricate forms and meaning of their Old Sinhala originals. More often they are free versions, elaborating particular images and ideas, bringing in modern voices or combining several songs.

'Richard Murphy's verse is classical in a way that demonstrates what the classical strengths really are. It combines a high music with simplicity, force and directness in dealing with the world of action. He has the gift of epic objectivity: behind his poems we feel not the assertion of his personality, but the actuality of events, the facts and sufferings of history' – TED HUGHES

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