Krishnan Varma

[Krishnan Varma was born in Kerala, a southwestern state of India. Varma's stories, in both English and Malayalam (an Indian language), have been published in India, the United States,

and Canada. "The Grass-Eaters" was first published in Wascana Review in 1985.]

The Grass-Eaters

For some time several years ago I was tutor to a spherical boy (now a spherical youth). One day his ovoid father, Ramaniklal Misrilal, asked me where I lived. I told him.

Misrilal looked exceedingly distressed. "A pipe, Ajit Babu? Did you say - a pipe, Ajit Babu?"

His cuboid wife was near to tears. "A pipe, Ajit Babu? How can you live in a pipe?"

It was true: at that time I was living in a pipe with my wife, Swapna. It was long and three or four feet across. With a piece of sack cloth hung at either end, we had found it far more comfortable than any of our previous homes.

The first was a footpath of Chittaranjan Avenue. We had just arrived in Calcutta from East Bengal where Hindus and Muslims were killing one another. The footpath was so crowded with residents, refugees like us and locals, that if you got up at night to relieve yourself you could not be sure of finding your place again. One cold morning I woke to find that the woman beside me was not Swapna at all but a bag of bones instead. And about fifty or sixty or seventy years old.

I had one leg over her too. I paid bitterly for my mistake. The woman very nearly scratched out my eyes. Then came Swapna, fangs bared, claws out . . . I survived, but minus one ear. Next came the woman's husband, a hill of a man, whirling a tree over his head, roaring. That was my impression, anyway. I fled.

Later in the day Swapna and I moved into an abandoned-looking freight wagon at the railway terminus. A whole wagon to ourselves – place with doors which could be opened and shut - did nothing but open and shut them for a full hour - all the privacy a man and wife could want – no fear of waking up with a complete stranger in your arms . . . it was heaven. I felt I was God.

Then one night we woke to find that the world was running away from us: we had been coupled to a freight train. There was nothing for it but to wait for the train to stop. When it did, miles from Calcutta, we got off, took a passenger train back, and occupied another unwanted-looking wagon. That was not the only time we went to bed in Calcutta and woke up in another place. I found it an intensely thrilling experience, but not Swapna.

She wanted a stationary home; she insisted on it. But she would not say why. If I persisted

in questioning her she snivelled. If I tried to persuade her to change her mind, pointing out all the

advantages of living in a wagon - four walls, a roof and door absolutely free of charge, and

complete freedom to make love day or night - she still snivelled. If I ignored her nagging, meals

got delayed, the rice undercooked, the curry over-salted. In the end I gave in. We would move,

I said, even if we had to occupy a house by force, but couldn't she tell me the reason, however irrelevant, why she did not like the wagon?

For the first time in weeks Swapna smiled, a very vague smile. Then, slowly, she drew

the edge of her sari over her head, cast her eyes down, turned her face from me, and said in a tremulous, barely audible whisper that she (short pause) did (long pause) not want (very long pause) her (at jet speed) baby-to-be-born-in-a-running-train. And she buried her face in her hands.

Our fourth child. One died of diphtheria back home (no longer our home) in Dacca; two, from fatigue, on our long trek on foot to Calcutta. Would the baby be a boy? I felt no doubt about it; it would be. Someone to look after us in our old age, to do our funeral rites when we died. I suddenly kissed Swapna, since her face was hidden in her hands, on her elbow, and was roundly chided.

Kissing, she holds, is a western practice, unclean also, since it amounts to licking, and should be eschewed by all good Hindus.

I lost no time in looking for a suitable place for her confinement. She firmly rejected all my suggestions: the railway station platform (too many residents); a little-used overbridge (she was not a kite to live so high above the ground); a water tank that had fallen down and was empty (Did I think that she was a frog?). I thought of suggesting the municipal primary school where I was teaching at the time, but felt very reluctant. Not that the headmaster would have objected if we had occupied one end of the back veranda: a kindly man, father of eleven, all girls, he never disturbed the cat that regularly kittened in his in-tray. My fear was: suppose Swapna came running into my class, saying, "Hold the baby for a moment, will you? I'm going to the l-a-t-r-i-n-e." Anyway, we set out to the school. On the way, near the Sealdah railway station, we came upon a cement concrete pipe left over from long-ago repairs to underground mains. Unbelievably, it was not occupied and, with no prompting from me, she crept into it. That was how we came to live in a pipe.

"It is not proper," said Misrilal, "not at all, for a school master to live in a pipe." He sighed deeply. "Why don't you move into one of my buildings, Ajit Babu?"

The house I might occupy, if I cared to, he explained, was in Entally, not far from where

the pipe lay; I should have no difficulty in locating it, it was an old building and there were a number of old empty coal tar drums on the roof; I could live on the roof if I stacked the drums in two rows and put a tarpaulin over them.

We have lived on that roof ever since. It is not as bad as it sounds. The roof is flat, not gabled, and it is made of cement concrete, not corrugated iron sheets. The rent is far less than that of other tenants below us - Bijoy Babu, Akhanda Chatterjee and Sagar Sen. We have far more light and ventilation than they. We don't get nibbled by rats and mice and rodents as often as they do. And our son, Prodeep, has far more room to play than the children below.

Prodeep is not with us now; he is in the Naxalite underground. We miss him, terribly. But there is some compensation, small though it is. Had he been with us, we would have had to wear clothes. Now we don't. Not much, that is. I make do with a loin cloth and Swapna with a piece slightly wider to save our few threadbare clothes from further wear and tear. I can spare little from my pension for new clothes. Swapna finds it very embarrassing to be in my presence in broad daylight so meagerly clad and so contrives to keep her back turned to me. Like a chimp in the sulks. I am fed up with seeing her backside and tell her that she has nothing that I have not seen. But she is adamant; she will not turn around. After nightfall, however, she relents: we are both nightblind.

When we go out - to the communal lavatory, to pick up pieces of coal from the railway track, to gather grass - we do wear clothes. Grass is our staple food now: a mound of green grass boiled with green peppers and salt, and a few ladles of very thin rice gruel. We took to eating it when the price of rice started soaring. I had a good mind to do as Bijoy Babu below us is believed to be doing. He has a theory that if you reduce your consumption of food by five grams each day, you will not only not notice that you are eating less but after some time you can do without any food at all. One day I happened to notice that he was not very steady on his feet. That gave me pause. He can get around, however badly he totters, because he has two legs; but I have only one. I lost the other after a fall from the roof of a tram. In Calcutta the trams are always crowded and if you can't get into a carriage you may get up on its roof. The conductor will not stop you. If he tries to, the passengers beat him up, set fire to the tram and any other vehicles parked in the vicinity, loot nearby shops, break street lamps, take out a procession, hold a protest meeting, denounce British imperialism, American neo-colonialism, the central government, capitalism and socialism, and set off crackers. I don't mind my handicap at all; I need wear only one sandal and thereby save on footwear.

So, on the whole, our life together has been very eventful. The 6 events, of course, were not always pleasant. But, does it matter? We have survived them. And now, we have no fears or anxieties. We have a home made of coal tar drums. We eat two square meals of grass every day. We don't need to wear clothes. We have a son to do our funeral rites when we die. We live very quietly, content to look at the passing scene: a tram burning, a man stabbing another man,

a woman dropping her baby in a garbage bin.