

CHAPTER III :

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THE GHOSTS OF VASU MASTER**

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III : i : An Introduction

III : ii : Use of Memories As a Novelistic
Technique

III : iii : Use of ‘Fables’

III : iv : Use of ‘Dreams’

Chapter III

III : i : An Introduction :

As pointed out earlier, The Ghosts of Vasu Master (1994) deals with the world of dreams and fantasy of a secondary school retired teacher Vasu Master. Since the beginning up to the end of novel, Vasu Master is the narrator. He has been suffering from many diseases as insomnia, stomach pains etc. and goes on visiting various doctors with a box file of medical reports. He has two sons, Vishnu and Venu who are away from him and his wife Mangala who lived with him for fifteen years and died before twenty years. Then onwards, Vasu Master became father as well as mother of his sons. As a successful teacher, he taught for forty years to eleven year students of class 6 B at P.G.Boys' School, Elipettai. Veera Naidu, a commercial minded man, was the Principal and owner of the school. Vasu Master, after retirement plans to write an essay entitled 'Four Decades In Classroom', which he considered serve as a guide for younger teachers. In which Vasu Master was about to write his experiences, views and aspirations. After retirement he

begins tuition classes for three four boys and one of them is papaya head Mani, a slow learner, retarded boy who will never speak. Even his parents got tired of him and wanted to get rid of him. The school principals used to say about Mani :

We don't know what is wrong with him and we can't give him special attention, they said.

It is not our job, Mani distrubs the class. ¹

Vasu Master has some ambitions and aspirations that is why he accepts the challenge of teaching Mani. He believes in gurukula systems of education where personal relationship between student and teacher is considered important. Vasu Master came to know that textbooks, school, blackboards, doctors, classrooms are futile for Mani. He followed technique of telling him several stories and fables as Grey Mouse and Blue Bottle, Grey Mouse and Black Crow, fables of spiders, firefly, wingless wasp and so on. He taught him, loved him as if Mani was his own son. He began to paint fantasies, dreams recalled past memories of his wedding with Mangala, his grandfather's practice of rasayanam, his grandmother, experiences in P.G. classes etc. To come out of his

loneliness, he took Mani in his company as part of his life, taught him, loved him, took care of him, even fed him as his own son. At the time of terminal examination, Vasu found that his teaching to Mani is futile because Mani could not speak anything.

The Ghosts of Vasu Master is the novel of Self-discovery. It is a very significant technique of fiction writing which is employed by Githa Hariharan. Infact, self discovery is a psychological process where the character studies or makes survey of his personal life, his deeds, achievements, failures with self knowledge, self memories in the past. Inshort, it is act or process of achieving self knowledge. Through 'self discovery', one can get insight to look in one's personality and can leave out demerits to develop his career.

Encarta World English Dictionary describes 'self discovery' as ;

Self discovery is the process of
learning about one's true personality
and motives.²

Everybody has his own existence and he or she tries to discover himself or herself but to complete self-discovery is impossible. Nobody understands one's identity till the end of one's

life. 'Self-discovery' is a psychological process which takes place in our mind automatically when we become aware of our own identity. It is individual contemplation or an action. Through this process, characters can disclose their hidden views, secrets, truths, failures, facts etc.

III : ii : Use of Memories as a Novelistic Technique :

The Ghosts of Vasu Master is undoubtedly a novel of self discovery. The Protagonist as well as the narrator of the novel, Vasu Master thinks about his existence in this world, his views and insight about teaching his ambitions. In his loneliness and sleeplessness, he recalls his past memories which bring with them various dreams and ghosts. In fact, one should take past experiences, mix into present and create new future. In this respect, the great modern English poet T.S. Eliot says :

The past should be altered by the present as
much as the present is directed by the past.³

Like wise, Vasu Master remembers his past memories and paints fantasies and dreams to create new views in an ideal world. This process of self-discovery is geared up by the arrival of Mani.

Githa Hariharan makes use of past in her novels. Vasu Master recalls his grandmother's cooking, his father's rasayanam, his advice, his past married life with Mangala, his teaching in P.G. and so on which are essential for self discovery. In an interview with Arnab Chakladar, she admits ;

This is something I am interested in doing in my fiction, my non-fiction, and in my life—making sense of the past, becoming part of the larger debates on our multiple pasts.⁴

In the opening of the novel, it seems that Vasu Master is not physically very sound. In the wake of retirement, he should have his life as a free bird but he has been suffering from many diseases and visiting one doctor after another. He has made a box-file not to keep certificates, he achieved in his life but medical reports, stool samples report, X rays etc. On the top, right hand edge of file, he has stuck a label; Vasu Master B.A. (English Language and Literature) Teacher, P.G. Boys' school, Elipettai. After examined by many doctors, one suggested Vasu Master to follow

homeopathy or Ayurveda and his dead father's ghost appeared in front of his eyes who was a doctor of Ayurveda.

Due to Vasu Master's habit of recalling past memories, he often gets disturbed in his teaching. Once he was teaching Wordsworth's poem 'Daffodils' to his class 6B. While he was reading poem aloud, some brighter students gaped at him. He was explaining why Wordsworth felt happier everytime when he remembered the yellow flowers growing wild. Meanwhile, Vasu Master remembered his father's rasayanam for stomach as cleaner and drowned into his thinking, but soon he discovered the disturbance of memories in his teaching. He came to know that a teacher should be physically and mentally sound person because he has to do interaction of knowledge with the students. Teacher should understand the psychology of students and should teach with youthful enthusiasm till the day of retirement. Vasu Master admits his failure in teaching as is reflected in the following lines :

Perhaps they were thinking no wonder, Vasu
Master is retiring next month. He really has
become a blathering old idiot.⁵

Vasu Master understood his rootless position in Veera Naidu's P.G. School at the time of retirement. He felt sorry that on the occasion of his retirement function, Veera Naidu, owner and headmaster of the school, devaluated Vasu Master by describing him as a patient, mild, soft-spoken in his speech etc.

In the chamber of retirement; spider, mice, cawing crows, old photographs, past memories have become Vasu Master's company. In fact, Vasu Master is a lovable father, husband, good and an honest teacher. Once, when he was alone in the home with an old family photograph, his past life with Mangala appeared in front of his eyes. In the photograph, he had put on narrow bordered Vest and a coat which he had got in his wedding, there are his boys and wife Mangala in it. He passed smoothly his fingers on this photograph and his nostalgic passions for his dead wife Mangala and his sons burst on. His total married life came in front of his eyes and there took place catharsis of his emotions. His love for his children and sons becomes clear from his following speech :

I placed my thumb on each face, saying the
boys name aloud so that I remembered

better. Every morning I went through a roll call of more than twenty years.⁶

'Self discovery' of Vasu Master gets momentum with arrival of Mani, a slow smooth, pale skinned, thick and short necked twelve year old boy who behaved as being six or seven year old boy. Being rootless in P.G. Boys School. Vasu Master made up his mind, accepted a challenge to teach Mani with his new insight. He gave him books, rubber, ruler, pencils and taught affectionately but Mani stood like a deaf-mute. While teaching in P.G. he used to say loudly as 'stand boy', but now he says warmly 'sit my boy' yet Mani has no interest in study and both became strangers. Mani found a classroom to be punishment room and student in the classroom as if a captive in the prison. Vasu came to know all what he is doing is futile. He says:

By the end of second week, I was beginning to wonder : Did he really need a teacher ? Or did he need someone who could demolish the walls of silence around him ?⁷

Instead of leading his retirement life happily as a free bird in company of his sons, he takes responsibility of unwanted and impossible mission. He didn't understand what for the life is every person should think of his own existence first. In case of Vasu Master's teaching mission Anjali Roy comments :

The Ghosts of Vasu Master is a treatise on teaching and healing passed on by word of mouth. It transmits orally Vasu Master's written transcription of his insight in to the above two areas in a 'notebook' that he hopes will develop into a formal study⁸

Vasu Master is much fortunate to have good legacy of his family. His grandmother was well thoughtful and lovable woman and his father was a doctor. Instead of becoming a doctor, Vasu became a teacher in English. He himself has experienced his father's medical practice of Ayurveda. His father believed that 'Ayurveda' means 'Science of life', a teacher of life who teaches everyone how to live. Anjali Roy comments in this respect :

Leading the reader by the hand, Vasu Master unearths the childhood of a Tamil speaking subhuman' which is also the buried traditional Indian past-of vedic, mantras and ayurvedic formulae of vegetarian cooking and rasayanams, of Gandhi and Shakespeare.⁹

His father used to make rasayanam which purified and strengthened all the tissues of body and he always advised Vasu that foods nurse the body. Vasu Master recalls his father's Ayurvedic treatment and his rasayanam when he is suffering from insomnia. He recalled his father's advice about what M.K. Gandhi said about Ayurveda :

The little that remains of the glory of ayurveda should not be completely lost.¹⁰

Everyone inherits the passions of love in his or her life and Vasu Master is no exception to this. When he was a little boy he saw calendar of young actress Rita-Mona hanging on the wall of his father's practice room. Rita Mona looked like an apsara who was gifted with lush eye- brows, thick lips like red blood, her

hypnotic and piercing look and breasts young and beautiful. Vasu Master, tempted by her beauty, thought that she would come out of calendar and he would embrace her. Then his feet touched the ground that she is in picture and discovered his childish position. Vasu Master was teacher in English and he had legacy of Shakespeare from his father because his father believed in Shakespeare to be a poet of humanity. Anjali Roy comments on Vasu Master's legacy of Shakespeare :

Vasu Master's choice of Shakespeare over the five other tomes comprising his father's eclectic liberal humanism over the indigenous legacy of Charaka, Sushruta and Vedas. It also signifies the victory of formal institutionalized schooling over the gurukula.¹¹

Though he studied English language and literature, studied works of Shakespeare, he has much love for his native language where he admits;

I was quite happy to be a Tamil speaking
sub-human.¹²

In fact, the teacher is a poet who gives ideas. He is light-giver, truth teller, a guide. But after retirement he becomes a man on exile, away from world of students and only meditating as an eagle. Vasu Master himself describes his retirement life as:

Since my exile from the classroom over the
last year I had acquired a strange new routine :
Solitary walks to the town library and back;
cooking for myself and selecting obviously on
food and stomach and the link between the
two; and setting things in order unravelling
knots of ideas, dreams, wishes, and
memories.¹³

Within forty years of teaching Vasu Master could not understand the expectations of his students, their likes and dislikes. In empty time of meditation, Vasu Master recalled his retirement farewell function where Vasu received a farewell present from

class VI B Students. While he was delivering his speech of advice, he heard a voice from back benches :

A voice piped up, Vasu Master, we have something for you. To remember us by.¹⁴

Immediately a small cardboard box passed from desk to desk and finally reached to Vasu Master's table. Vasu Master opened it and a small brown frog jumped out of it. Vasu Master got ashamed of his student's silly behaviour. But someone said in shy voice that there is something else in the box and Vasu Master found inside a blank notebook and a green plastic pen. Vasu Master discovered his position as a teacher in the last forty years, got upset and began to write his experiences, ambitions, and new techniques of teaching in the diary. He wrote in diary "Who is the creature called Teacher?". He wrote the story of Mouse who went to snake and asked him to teach him to become a teacher. The snake suggested mouse to be first judge, priest and doctor. Snake suggested him to grow womb, to deliver and be mother. Mouse asked his mother to teach him to be mother but he can't because he should have motherly qualities. Vasu Master discovered now the role of teacher is of mother and

not a easy thing. In fact Githa Hariharan's novels are stuffed with intellectual vigor. She gives more importance to subject. She portrays a teachers' world while she doesn't think of plot but themes. She expresses her view in her interview with Anuradha Marwah Roy :

I am not a plot oriented writer. I prefer to see my business as a writer as a planned, structured way of presenting my subject, dissecting it, linking it with other related themes.¹⁵

While in loneliness, Vasu Master recalled something about his mother whose parents didn't want to spend money on naming ceremony with fear that people would laugh for their failure to give birth to a son. He discovered blind-faiths where a sweeper woman named her Laxmi. He wants to take much from his father who told him that morality is king of universe and the mind is queen. He was chief physician of Vasu's household and he recalled his grandmother who taught him that food is magic weapon and it cures our body naturally. There wasn't sugar in her kitchen but a basket of chilies, she used to eat raw chilies, fried, dried and herself

seemed thin and delicate as chilly. She often disliked the word medicine but was creative in writing journals and exercises. Her wisdom chutneys were of great imagination leaps. Vasu Master compares his notes with his grand mother's chutneys. Vasu Master comments on modern school and education.

We have seen that a school or a teacher can fail to educate pupil, the words school and teaching have become elastic. They can be cut and stretched to fit almost anything. They are now available in a free size that fits any institution, any puppet or dummy who cares to wear them.¹⁶

It seems from Vasu Master that teachers are more suspicious than any others. In loneliness, Vasu Master drowned deep into fear that the mole on his chin to be of cancer and often he looked carefully into Mangalás mirror. Even after every bath, he lifts each foot deliberately and put it down so that there should not be danger of sleeping. His fear of cancer reveals from his grief :

I felt a sharp stubble on it though I had never tried to draw the razor across it. Does cancer, I wondered begin as a bristly, hairy little mouse ? ¹⁷

It is misfortune of Vasu Master that his mother died when he was a little boy and his wife Mangala died in his youthful age when his sons Vishnu and Venu were little ones. After death of Mangala, there remained with Vasu, her memories and her shadow only. He became father as well as mother of his family. While cleaning the house, doing household duties, Vasu passed days after days by recalling her memories. While teaching Mani he still remembers his teaching to Vishnu and Venu. After death of Mangala, Vasu Master played the role of father, teacher and mother. When Vishnu was studying for his high school certificate examination, Vasu Master used to sleep next to Vishnu so that he couldn't feel the absence of Mangala. He used to get up at five o'clock in the morning, to wake Vishnu for study and used to serve him a glass of hot coffee. He served meals for Vishnu and Venu, fed them as Mangala had fed. Vasu Master spent every day of his adult life with growing boys.

Infact he himself admits that he did all but had not idea what to do. In the absence of Mangala, Vasu Master played her role and Vishnu passed examination. He also recalls teaching Venu cycling who could mount the cycle easily but couldn't pedal it. He taught him how to pedal but not the art of balancing. He still remembers, when Mangala died, Venu was missing but few hours later Venu was found on a deserted road, his cycle lying by a tree. Vasu Master wants to teach Mani as his sons Vishnu and Venu. He recalls his sons as :

I remember Venu as a skinny wiry baby, his tiny face ablaze with curiosity as he discovered that my books could be opened and closed, that they could tear with an enjoyable ripping sound.¹⁸

Once he opened Mangala's trunk, he found her little treasures as a small mirror, two sandalwood boxes of kumkumam, a small pocket of old photographs, their wedding invitation, three pieces of her dowry silver and so on. When Vasu looked at old photographs, his mind became emotional which becomes clear from his speech :

I looked through the photographs but felt very little emotion. I was there, with a head full of wavy black hair. So was Mangala and later the boys. But all of us were stiff, unfriendly, dream-like figures.¹⁹

He discovered that once he was a young, full of wavy black hair but now they are unfriendly dream-like figures. There were bunches of garlish flowers, small canvases were embroidered with flowers, leaves, tame birds and animals. There was Mangala's signature to the right bottom of every strip. When he went on sea-shore, and heard the sound of sea, he got hallucinated that Mangala was looking out to the stretches of sea. He found Mangala's sari which she had wore on the occasion of an annual function of P.G. Now Vasu Master awakened from memories and got sense of his oldness which seems from his following speech :

I looked into mirror, and saw an ugly stranger.

He had gray, thinning hair. His face was scared: pockmarks, creases a map of lines and

grilles. The eyes were what shocked me the most. They were a hounded animals.²⁰

To get back to rotten fruit of past memories, Vasu Master began day-dreaming and night-dreaming. Once he dreamed that he was flying. He flied over roads, rooftops, felt the warmth of the evening sun on his back and got much pleased. After getting up he lost the pleasure of dream and imagined his wife Mangala who was a cloudy memory than a person. He says :

Although Mangala and I, had two sons Vishnu and Venu, I knew her more as cloudy memory than a person.²¹

He recalled her pale and insubstantial figure, walking along the sea-shore. He recalled his good relations with Jameela a childhood friend of Mangala who taught her sewing. Vasu could hear their talking, whispering, sudden laughter on the steps beyond the kitchen. She used to meet Vasu Master every week after Mangala's death with pieces of embroidery, but one day she came to handover Mangala's pieces of embroidery. Vasu Master became more isolated due to departing Jameela and lost his one star of

hope. Vasu Master cannot forget memory of Mangala and Jameela. In case of man and woman relationship, Dr. Jayprakash Shinde comments :

Geetha Hariharan suggests that man always struggles to make woman part of himself, the extension of his will. The knowledge that she is 'other than himself' is torture to him. He never tries to unravel the mystery that she is and to know the reality of her and this consequently leads to the distance in the relationship.²²

As a visionary teacher, with forty years teaching experience in P.G., Vasu Master began to teach Mani but he don't know whom he is teaching. As if a young teacher and with over confidence whose feet are not ready to touch the ground, Vasu Master accepted a challenge to teach Mani who hated notebooks and pencils. While showing him a picture of a bird like a crow, Vasu Master made loud voice of crow's cawing and Mani thought that the old man Vasu Master was turning into a crow. Mani slashed all the books of Vasu Master into series of strips yet Vasu Master

began to teach him with experience in P.G. Vasu got upset, came to near discovery that it was a futile mission. He regrets :

I stood by, guilty and chastised the years
of child's play entwining themselves
around my feet.²³

Vasu Master recalled three punishments in P.G. and he thought which punishment could be applicable to Mani. The first punishment was reserved for the sons of rich people where they were advised to study for being pride of P.G. The second was to put these boys to work and the third was for the poorest boys which was old fashioned cane. He got confused which punishment to apply for Mani but remembered his grandmother and father who never punished him but called him 'nuisance Krishna'.

Vasu Master discovered that the teaching in P.G. with books, black-board was futile for Mani for he being a much coward boy and one can't step further in fearfulness. In case of education of Mani, Anjali Roy comments :

In Githa Hariharan's Ghosts of Vasu
Master, both these institutions medical and

educational respond to Mani's singular ailment with characteristics assertion of the superiority of the impersonal. The doctors, prescribed nurses, schools normalcy.²⁴

Considering Mani's situation, Vasu Master told Mani a story of a wise old woman and a boy. Old woman and a little boy were living in a forest. The woman was wise, strong, bold, but the boy was much fearful. The boy assumed that there were wild animals behind each bush. He wanted to see the tigers, lions so the woman overfed his head with stories of lions and tigers. Once the boy hallucinated the arrival of tiger into their hut, he ran to the river, jumped into it and drowned. Infact, there was not tiger but was the fear of tiger in the mind of boy. Vasu Master and Mani both are fearful, Vasu fears of his insomnia, stomach pains, cancer and Mani of learning. Vasu Master expects from Mani as well as he himself should come out of fear and to try to live as wise woman in the forest.

Vasu Master wanted to know the existence of human life. So he went to meet a swami with Venkatesan. In his preaching Swami

said, 'nowadays nobody is happy because there is pain and suffering everywhere. The people can't become happy with money and rich food'. Swami further said :

Look around you what do you see ? Nothing but pain, pain and suffering. The harder you struggle for happiness, the deeper the more conclusive your misery.²⁵

By listening this, Vasu master found himself to be lucky to be fed well by his grandmother. Swami insisted on travelling in search of God who is within our body. He advised the devotees to detach from their wives and children and Vasu Master thought that he has already detached from his wife because she was died and his sons Vishnu and Venu were away from him as strangers. He got inspired by swami's advice where he said :

Karma is our jail warden. Or better still, think of karma as a field. We reap what we have sown. If we plant chillies, we will harvest chillies. If we planted sugar cane, we are entitled to enjoy the sweet taste of molasses.²⁶

Vasu Master felt his life without Mangala, to be futile. While doing any work he recalled her. Once he went to Veera Naidu to seek permission to take his class to see a film. Meanwhile Vasu Master recalled his visit to the theatre with Mangala and his two sons when they had gone to see the film Henry VIII. In the film, Henry seized and embraced a new woman at each time when Mangala covered Venu's head with the end of her sari and Vishnu's with her handkerchief. Vasu came to know that it was Mangala who could do that otherwise it was impossible for him to do in case of his students.

In the chamber of retirement day to day business of Vasu Master was a meditation, dreaming, painting fantasies. Once he thought about his aim of life, his role in this world and why he had come in this world etc. He writes in his diary ;

The body is always in a peculiar, unstable situation. It is the nuclear and the starting point of the perennial novel-gazing question, who I am ?²⁷

Infact, Vasu master was a patient and whom he was teaching was another patient. Vasu Master was isolated from neighbours, society as a stranger. Inside the room, he often observed his body which was thin, with stringly neck, dark pitted skin, teary eyes, sagging belly and matchstick legs. He brought into use his father's advice who used to say that 'in Kallyuga, our country has lost its way because people preach at each-other and throw rotten garbage out of their windows'. He said that the youths of our nations were becoming weak by diarrhoea and they were slaves of false physicians. There was need of strong young men with convictions, beliefs but we had young fools who made only violence. The diarrhoea began on the day when M.K. Gandhi was killed. Vasu Master got cherished by recalling his father's advice as a weathered plant becomes fresh after getting water. He recalled his father's advice :

Our bodies are our gardens, My father had
then said to me, to the which our wills are
gardeners.²⁸

There gets storm in Vasu Master's mind, when he recalls the Motto of Veera Naidu's P.G. 'Work is worship' which appears farcical. Infact in P.G. there was financial harassment of parents, students and teachers.

Everybody thinks of his existence in this world which is not permanent and Vasu Master is also no exception to this. He saw a tamarisk tree in his father's garden whose roots were deep rooted into soil. He recalled his father's advice to keep away impure and stagnate water from tamarisk tree to protect it from diseases. At the same time, Vasu Master's roots are not deep rooted as tamarisk tree but have become weak due to several ailments and diseases. Vasu Master often plans of planting trees means to get cure from his ailment which is impossible but Mani is his growing plant who is the same as he himself.

As a learned man, Vasu Master is haunted with some insights and visions about education. His heritage wasn't as Veera Naidu, of pretending, lying, grabbing money from the poor but having faith in ayurveda, Gandhi and Shakespeare. He himself says about his father :

My father had faith not just in God, but in the power of healing ayurveda and the truths of both Gandhi and Shakespeare.²⁹

He got shocked and surprised when he knew from Gopu, Veera Naidu's admission policies, corruption, casteism, gherao of parents, pressures etc. The teachers were selling examination papers to earn money. Teachers were not teaching. They thought of only profit and not their titles because everything had collapsed. The teachers were not paid so they had to do other businesses to fill their stomach, Gopu said Vasu Master :

Do you realize that your pupils are being bought and sold ? That they are, like so many heads of cabbage, being haggled over for bribes and capitation fees? Teachers are selling examination papers.³⁰

Vasu Master was believer of Sushruta, an Ayurvedic surgeon in 600 B.C. as well as Charaka. He recalled his father who had pointed out to Vasu Master what Charaka has said :

Complexion, clarity, good voice, longevity, genius, happiness satisfaction, nourishment, strength, intellect- all these are conditioned by food.³¹

Vasu Master keeps in front of eyes Sushuruta as well as Charaka. Githa Hariharan states the importance of Ayurved for Indian people. She compares western education, medicine with Indian Charaka, Sushuruta. Anjali Roy comments on Githa Hariharan's reference of Charaka and Sushuruta in her article :

Githa Hariraharan's The Ghosts of Vasu Master counterpoises against authoritative texts of western education, medicine and narrative, the indigenous legacy of Charaka, Sushuruta, Gandhi and Vishnu Sarma.³²

Vasu being the son of a doctor, his father examined Vasu Master thoroughly and suggested him how the food circulated the blood. Even Mani was also taken by Vasu to his father's clinic, where his father cleaned Mani's tongue. Vasu still remembered that his father had real test or a healer's skill and there were always

thick spined books, the files, rasayanam, bottles on his table. When Vasu Master compared himself and his wife Mangala with his grandmother, he came to know that his grandmother, though an illiterate woman, was more bold than he himself and his wife Mangala. Though Vasu Master and Mangala were educated, then believed in ghosts but his grandmother, an illiterate woman never believed in ghosts. He himself admits that he was afraid of going up the dark stairs of his father's home in Nagerwaram. Mangala often used to tell ghost stories to her sons. She played her role of wife, mother with feminine modesty. After her death, Vasu Master could not fill her place. As sons grew up, Venu became tender but more reserved and Vishnu followed good sense and worldly wisdom. Vishnu never believed in ghosts but always remembered ghosts stories told by Mangala. He always got worried about Vasu's health, his stomach pains which is revealed from Vishnu's letter to Vasu Master :

It is not for a son to advice a father, I knew, but
if you persist in ignoring our wishes and
remaining in Elipettai, I strongly feel you

should forget about tuition or any other kind of work. After all, retirement is the ideal time to put on end to all work and turn your thoughts to God.³³

Infact, what his son understood about life, Vasu Master could not. Vasu Master kept the letter unanswered because Vasu Master was unable to concord with his son's views. Mani was part of his life and to lead his life without Mani was impossible for him. It would have been better if he had lived in the company of his elder son Vishnu instead of teaching Mani.

In adverse circumstance, a word of guidance by any wise person is much of value. Whenever Vasu Master gets suffering from stomach pains, he takes advice of Swami and memories of his father's advice. Once Swami advised his devotees that the greatest enemy of our stomach was undigested hunk in our stomach and insisted on karma which was curry of our actions, thoughts and feelings. He insisted on improvement of our digestive power. Vasu Master recalled his father's advice in case of digesting to improve health because one can't change his fate.

As a discontent person in life, Vasu Master compares himself with Venkatesan, Veera Naidu and their mystery of happy and healthy life. In fact, Venkatesan is a poor man, has eight children and seven among them are daughters, his wife is always pregnant yet his power of digestion is excellent. He discovered that money is no qualification of an educator. He says :

Money is all very well to put up a building, buy
some books and a few desks and chairs. But
can you buy a teacher or a pupil ?³⁴

He also compares himself with Veera Naidu who is the owner of P.G. School. He has two sons, one is an engineer in America, has got promotion, gets thousand dollars of salary, has send tickets to Veera Naidu to visit America yet according to Vasu Master, he is not happy. Veera Naidu is always busy in admissions, fees, rewards and punishments for teachers. He passed Raman, the son of film producer by taking money. So P.G. without Veera Naidu would be P.G. without sun in the sky. Vasu Master regrets in the following speech :

If the patient does not have faith in the healer he has chosen, or in the healer assigned to him by chance, does he have the remotest chance of a cure ? ³⁵

Vasu Master's mind is moving as wind to any direction. Sometimes, he wants to be excellent teacher, sometimes a person like Swami. When once he listens to Swami's parable, he wishes to become a swami. So that he asks Venkatesan the qualifications of Swami. Swami told in his preaching that there was a man who was always among his friends for eating, drinking, talking endlessly till late in the night. When he was alone in his home, his companions were words, pictures, dreams of lovers, body guards, gatekeepers etc. He enjoyed his life happily, ate well, and amused. One day he got struck by mysterious illness where there was no any remedy. His beloved friends departed from him and what he had enjoyed poetry, painting, wines, music began to pain him. He had sucked his harem dry. He came to know that he had wasted fifty years in his life on praying false God and he denied and cheated the God within himself. Vasu Master compared his situation as the same of

him who is always engaged in teaching Mani and dreaming. Vasu Master also didn't understand the God within him. He wants to become guru, swami and doesn't understand the ways of life. He tells Venkatesan :

I am not dead, I thought. Not yet anyway. Nor I am in deep sleep. So why should I accept his offer of an eye to see with and an ear to hear? ³⁶

To go along the right path, Vasu Master wants a prophet or a guru, though already he himself is a teacher. He recalls his grandmother, father, and their ways of life. The first guru of his grandmother was her husband but after his death, she began to speak of him with amusement. She could not concord with her husband where she describes him as :

What is a husband, Vasu? Just a hungry stomach and a few other things, never mind what. But all equally greedy, swallowing like a big red swollen mouth, then chewing and belching. ³⁷

But Vasu Master did not believe that his grandfather would have dismissed by his superiors through bells, memos, pecns. He tells that his grandfather was a good clerk. His grandmother was scornful about her husband's foreign and local Gods. She told Vasu master that India needed a new prophet like M.K. Gandhi.

To come out of ailments, Vasu Master recalls his father's advice to the patients that the healer should know what type of patient is and what sort of disease patient has. But in Vasu Master's life, he didn't understand what type of pupil Mani is and what he is teaching him.

As days after days passed by teaching Mani, Vasu Master came to know that there should be co-relationship between student and teacher as gurukula for self fulfilment. In case of relationship in her every novel, Githa Hariharan says in her interview with Anuradha Marwah Roy :

I am not interested in a 'photographic' view of relationships. I am anxious to go well beyond the banal or obvious, to allow for contradictions and ambiguity in every

relationships, whether it is between a man and woman, or two woman or indeed the relationship between a person and his dreams and desires.³⁸

If same crop is grown in the field, the field also gets tired. Meanwhile, Vasu Master remembered a father and his son who had come for treatment in his father's clinic. The father of the patient told Vasu's father that his son behaved like a mad, lies in the bed like log, neglects field, and jumps up, rushes out suddenly to field to destroy the crop. Vasu's father examines the patient and comes to know that he was not mad but wanted to have possession of his land. So he told them the story of three brothers called New, Old and Timeless. Their father divided land among them, gave them freedom and died. The sons began to cultivate the land in their own ways. Old sowed same crop every year while New sowed every year new crop as wheat, rice, roses. But Timeless followed old ways and planted one crop for four years where soil got tired. Then Vasu Master discovered that everything has season or period. As there is co-relation between soil and crop, life and death as well as

students and teacher. He understood that the mind is our supreme concern. So he writes in his notebook :

Look at life; without death, it is a half-truth. So is death without life. Together the two make up the whole, fundamental truth. Now look at me carefully and at yourselves. What are we without each other? ³⁹

Vasu Master often thinks about a notion of teacher, role of a teacher though he himself is teacher. According to him, teacher is a direct source of light. Student comes to teacher for knowledge and becomes a member of teacher's family. After retirement, he says about the school and teacher :

The school was not made of brick and mortar. It was made of something natural, an intimate relationship between teacher and taught in a home of solitude and silence. ⁴⁰

According to him, due to living relationship between student and teacher, student learns inward methods of teacher, the secrets of his mind and the spirits of his life and works. He says :

The pupil belonged to the teacher not to an institution of stone and mud. Learning was a lifelong task not a brief sojourn in an exotic, artificial place.⁴¹

While teaching Mani, Vasu Master thinks of the legacy of teacher which is of an umbrella. Students are not the captives in the hands of Masters. When the pupil looks at teacher with affection, there should not be any secrets between them. The role of teacher is not of a tradesman who brings and sells goods by kilos but he teaches students the truths. The schools run by teachers at home, as resident, Rigveda describes them as the students to be frog croaking lustily after rain. In these schools, nothing new and organic grows and the pupils struggle in meditation to grasp the truths of the text. It is same as dry woods on ashes which will never blaze. In case of teacher-centered system, Anjai Roy comments in her article :

In this teacher-centered system where the teacher used to be thought of as indispensable to knowledge, the master's example more than any precept instructs for apprentice who absorbs unconsciously what he is taught.⁴²

Vasu Master recalls the incident when Veera Naidu went to America to meet his son for three months, where the teachers were suggested to keep an eye on P.G. Raghavan took pile of notebooks, began to write on black board as 'my pet fruit is mango'. No student paid any attention to him. Raghavan spoke more and more loudly but no use at all. Yet he advised Vasu Master not to be patient in the class which Vasu Master disliked and addressed him in his diary:

It is possible to know very little, and make use of this knowledge well. It is also possible to know a great deal and act very stupidly. All of us have met the learned fool.⁴³

Vasu Master advised Mani to read the books which have meaning . He told him a story of a boy who refused to eat but the

boy himself ate chutney and licked the pot when he came in company of an old woman. When Mani's brother, Gopu, didn't come to pick up Mani, Vasu Master cooked food for Mani and fed him also. He taught him how to brush the teeth, wash his face. He also taught him to make drawings of houses, trees, flowers. Once Mani smiled and whispered at Vasu Master, he was overjoyed. Though Mani was a fool clown, idiot, he possessed of an intelligence according to Vasu Master. So that once Vasu Master asked question to himself " Am I Mani's teacher or guardian?"

Nageshwram and his father's home in it, is inseparable part of Vasu Master's life though his sons have suggested him to sell his home. Once Vasu Master took Mani to Nageshwaram. When he unlocked the door of his house and entered in front room, his head overfled with past memories of his father, grandmother and so on. His grandmother, her wrinkled face and arms, her sitting place came in front of his eyes, He recalled his father's clinic room, patients, and his father's consulting. He recalled his grandmother's wisdom chutnys and he heard sound from some where :

Purify the blood, boomed a voice somewhere
 behind the eyes. Here, drink up this
 rasayanam.⁴⁴

Now his grandmother and father are no more but their memories and advice are with him by which he can do self discovery of his life. In her interview with Luan Gains, Githa Hariharan says :

As a writer, I feel like a fly on the wall myself.
 I have never killed identifying too closely with
 any one character in my novels. All of them
 have something of me and all of them are
 different as well.⁴⁵

III : iii : Use of Fables :

Vasu Master avoided teaching Mani with black-board and classroom but by narrating fables. In fact fable is not realistic where animals and birds are the characters, but through the characters of animals, writer teaches good thoughts, morality which is related to human life. As in George Orwells 'Animal Farm' all the characters are animals such as pigs, cows but it teaches the consequences of

communism in Russia. Vasu Master narrates Mani one after another fable to teach him truths and morality.

Vasu Master narrated Mani the story of the Mascot. His intention was to persuade Mani an importance of teacher in human life. If a man doesn't get good teacher, he becomes as Mascot. The fable runs like this. Instead of lion, once an old, wise fox became king of forest. He brought together all animals, told them value of unity. Instead of killing each-others, they began to live together as a big family. All the animals as frogs and snakes became friends, ex-chital and ex-tiger became brother and sisters. To a surprise, after a year, a strong and wonderful animal named Mascot was born who had ears like rabbits and hooves like camel's, stripes like zebra. One day the old fox died making all animals aware of Mascot. As Mascot grew up, animals began to remember their past language, the taste of blood. All animals suspected at Mascot, felt to be guilty mascot, began to avoid him for being nuisance spy. Even grandson of wise fox warned him not to prey any animal but Mascot got puzzled and cleared that he was just like other animals. Grandson of Mascot warned Mascot :

Mascot, this is last warning I am giving it to you for old times sake. Find out who are you and then decide how and where you will live ? ⁴⁶

Mascot got jumbled, left alone, without any friend. He tried to remember who he was. Mascot had no teacher so he didn't learn how to fight, to be cunning, how to hide and lie, how till the danger is passed. For being unable to tell who he was, all the animals fell on him, torn his skin and forest became jungle again. Vasu Master taught Mani that teacher is important otherwise Mani's situation will be like that Mascot. He has to persuade Mani that teacher is a light giver, guide and truth-teller. In fact, Githa Hariharan has chosen various spaces as of woman, teacher. She is not only feminist but she has much known and has zeal for notion of teacher. She says in her interview with Preeti Verma Lal :

My first three novels look at a small space – whether it is a woman's space or teacher's or storyteller's – and expand this space through the power of the story. ⁴⁷

The stories for Mani, brings moral lessons, the philosophy of life. Now he is teaching Mani that an enemies though they are neighbours, cannot become friends of each-other. To develop friendship there should be love, affection, an honesty, sacrifice for each-other. So Vasu Master tells Mani the story of Why Are Grey Mouse and Black Crow Neighbours? The Grey Mouse and Black Crow were neighbours but never been friends. The mouse was living inside the hole with his wife and children. The crow, as scavenger, always alone, decisive and single minded whereas mouse prepared to stay at the door of mouse-hole. Greedy crow thought that there was good meal for him his next door. Many times crow swooped down the mouse hole but the mouse rescued. Both recognised each others' habits and could not become friends. Vasu Master teaches Mani that the friendship is not possible if other wants to prey his friend. Vasu Master teaches Mani of friendship as :

So at long last the neighbours discovered each other. Both realized mouse in his own sad way,

and crow in his dim, way what they were to each other.⁴⁸

Friendship is impossible without exchange of thoughts, feelings. Vasu Master expect from Mani to come out of fear because the teacher is not an enemy of pupil.

By taking Mani into confidence, Vasu Master tries to develop friendship with him as found in the gurukula system of education. He expects that Mani should become a part of his life. To tell him the importance of friendship, Vasu Master tells him a story of Blue Bottle Finds A Friend. Grey Mouse was in search of friend who couldn't make friendship with a crow. Blue Bottle was bigger and different type of fly than others so other flies hated him supposing him to be out of their community, an enemy. They began to tease him and brought him in spiders' web where spider can prey him. Other flies delighted and Blue Bottle thought to be worth to die. Meanwhile Grey Mouse interfered and Blue Bottle's life is saved : and both became friends of each others. Vasu Master taught Mani that the true friend is he who participates in others' joys and sorrows like Grey mouse. But Vasu Master came to know that

Mani could not learn anything, but behaving as six or seven year old boy. He says :

Only this much was clear, for whatever reason,
Mani had not learnt-or had refused to learn-
to act the way a boy of his age was expected to
act. ⁴⁹

Mani sits inside the room only and doesn't mix up with other boys. Vasu Master expects that Mani should not be like Blue Bottle who didn't know any thing about life. In fact Blue Bottle is a fly yet through him he teaches Mani the ways of life. With the weapon of fable, Githa Hariharan has taught the philosophy of life. In this context Anjali Roy comments in Literary Criterion :

The reader can hear the voice of her human characters in tales of the mouse and the crow, the spider and the fly. But like its role model the Ghosts of Vasu Master is no childish entertainment but a treatise on 'niti' or practical wisdom. ⁵⁰

Vasu master narrates Mani the story of Inspector Buck Tooth.

Once Inspector Buck Tooth, an elder litter of Grey Mouse went to his father who was experimenting with Blue Bottle instead of paying attention to his family. Grey Mouse told the story of Blue Bottle to all the flies as well as his elder kitter. Once Grey Mouse dreamt of turning into a fly, which was different from other flies. He could not mix up with others but sat alone, couldn't learn leaps as quick leap which is useful for survival of life. He couldn't learn simple leaps or simplest lessons also. The Grey Mouse said :

You are not aware perhaps, that flies learn two types of jumps as they are growing up one jump is the quick leap the leap of survival.⁵¹

The older flies tried to train him, coax him but he could not learn the simplest lessons. So Grey Mouse, as a friend, took him inside the mousehole. In fact Blue Bottle was not a fly but fear in the mind of Grey Mouse. If Mani became fearful about life, the teaching of Vasu Master will not have any value.

Through every fable, Vasu Master is teachng Mani a new truth, new thought, new insight. Already he has discovered that he

is an old, fearful of his ailments, and stomach pains and his pupil is young boy but fears of learning. Vasu Master has discovered from himself that weak and fearful person can't do anything. He expects Mani to become bold like spider and not like the Grey Mouse who always lives in the mousehole. To make Mani bold, he narrates him a story of The Spider's Pleasure. The spider was a supreme ruler in his cobweb in whose hands, all the power was controlled. But the Grey mouse once challenged spider by staying inside the mousehole. Vasu Master describes Grey Mouse as :

Not only he had to teach Blue Bottle about the spider, its nature and function, the pretty usefulness and bigger dangers of the cobweb, but he had to coax Blue Bottle into learning leaps.⁵²

In earlier fables, Vasu Master taught Mani, the truth of life. He taught Mani to ask questions, to criticize, to find fault. Vasu Master says:

I told Mani : This business of asking questions can be quite infectious you tell

some one again and again. Don't take my word as unchallenged truth. Criticize, find fault and ask questions.⁵³

He taught Mani, that one should have his own views, clues, opinions, concepts. As firefly has legacy of his own light so that he can wander anywhere in the forest till midnight. The person can't develop with other's clues or ideas. So he narrated Mani story of Firefly's Legacy. Once a firefly craved a magical lantern and went through the forest at midnight. He saw everything, and nothing was impossible to him to understand. Other travellers couldn't seek their way because they couldn't get light of firefly which was on his back. Vasu Master teaches Mani that one should have his own light as firefly means own clues, ideas, ways of life otherwise the parasite person can't go ahead. He teaches Mani through symbol of firefly.

And while he travelled, he saw everything, he flew past in the colours of this light. So nothing was impossible to understand and classify. The

entire forest, and indeed all of nature, was thus his dominion by birthright.⁵⁴

The main aim of Vasu Master's teaching Mani is to make him bold, encourage him. Since Vasu Master is teaching Mani, he is stranger to Mani. Through narrating various fables, Vasu has tried to make him bold to mix in the community. In case of Githa Hariharan's technique of teaching morality through fables, Anjali Roy says in Literary Criterion :

The stories, the lives of Vasu Master and Mani metamorphosed as animal tales with the non-human world mirroring the human make not only delightful 'telling' but also exposed the process by which fiction converts 'reality'.⁵⁵

Thus the use of fables is an important novelistic device used by Githa Hariharan, a device with metaphorical undertones, clearly brings out the theme of self-discovery in the novel.

III : iv : Use of Dreams :

As 'self-discovery' of Vasu Master geared up with the arrival of Mani and his teaching for him, it also speeded with Vasu

Master's dreams and memories. It was routine for Vasu Master to day-dream and meditate and then to write down in his notebook. According to him dreams are not an accident or meaningless but the masks of desire. He says that an ayurvedic physician can examine the health of a patient by investigating his dreams. We dream in sleep as well as when we are awoken. Vasu Master points out different categories of dreams as sight of waking life, sight of future. He recalled Swami's advice where Swami said in case of dreams and memories :

Train your memory, said Venkatesan's Swami. Train it to help you concentrate, and discover all your lapses in memory so that you may correct these errors. Concentration is the path to self realization.⁵⁶

In his view, by meditation, concentration, one will know sublime energy in him. In case of mind, swami advised to fasten mind on Great Cobra who bears earth on his head who serves as a bed for Vishnu, garland of Siva, a weapon for Ganesha's hand and guardian of parent's field. Then Vasu Master understood the

relevance, meditation, memories, dreams and concentration. Vasu Master tells how we get dreams. Once he was waiting for Mani to teach him meanwhile he saw a crow cawing, perched on a branch hanging outside his window. He heard the cawing of crow and drowned into deep imagination. He imagined that black crow means face of death and his cawing means invitation of death. He dreamt that the death is living in his closed airless room where there is musty smell so that he opened the window of his room wide. The question arises here if Vasu Master is so fearful how can he make Mani bold. Vasu Master got asleep and the crow flew into his dream. He was alone on the deserted road where he saw a dead rat lying on the road. The crow stared at Vasu Master so that he could go away. The crow plunged his beak into fleshiest part of rat, drilled hole into flesh. After getting up, he began to interpret the dream. He thought that one should not talk about life after death as donkeys but for dreamers it is impossible. Vasu Master thought that after his death his situation will be like that of dead rat. By seeing anything his imagination takes wheel to run ahead.

Vasu master is not concerned with only his own dreams but the dreams of animals like Grey Mouse which he told to Mani. It might be search of Vasu Master that animals can dream. As in the mind of Vasu Master, there are lots of questions in the mind of Grey Mouse. Grey Mouse dreamt of what he has seen, heard, thought all day. He also dreamt of Blue Bottle, the flies, wasps etc. In his dream, once he saw a cat and determined not to tremble and quake. He saw edge of cold pond. All the impossible things become possible in dream. Once Vasu Master saw an egg shaped face of Mani in his dream. In fact Vasu Master has much zeal for Mani. He has known that Mani is not a victim and he came to know Mani's increasing hunger for stories, wisdom, chutneys. He has known that to get entry in the world of knowledge, there is need of obstacle running race. His dreams are of Mani only which seems from his speech :

Night after night, my own lack of sleep as
incurable as Mani's loss of speech I asked
myself : could Mani subvert the natural order

of things ? Grow complete in a way the
unafflicted cannot ?⁵⁷

For Vasu Master, dreams are much helpful to recall his memories where lot of incidents in past life came as lively in front of him and after waking up he gives new light to his dreams. Sometimes he got feared after waking up as he himself says :

But that night was different ; I woke up the
next morning with a fear that made me
examine my body once again, very
carefully.⁵⁸

Once he dreamt that he was lying alone in the dark room where he and Mangala had lived for some months after his father's death. He felt itchy and suspected there to be a couple of mosquitoes. He felt something crawling over his back, arms and legs. He also felt that the wound on his body is choked by tiny maggots. In dream, he saw Mangala's death again. When he woke up from his sleep, he found that he was alone in the room, with no itch, wound, crawling on back but it was a silly dream.

By dreams, Vasu Master recalled his past life with Mangala. He was horrified when he saw in dream that Mangala was dying again and after waking up felt the absence of his wife and children. He expresses his feeling for Mangala :

I don't remember Mangala ever going to a doctor. She would hover around my bed with strips of cloth dipped in cold water when I lay groaning with a fever, or she would sit up, night after night, mending the boys' shorts and my vests, while I marked the homework books for the next day.⁵⁹

He remembered how once he had gone on trip of Marina beach a little outside Madras with his wife and sons. They enjoyed finding shells in the waves of water. Vasu Master and his sons Vishnu and Venu waded into water by holding each-other's hands. Mangala did not come into water with them but walked along beach looking for shells to add in her children's collection of shell. Most of the time she sat on the sand and looked at them where they

were. All these memories crowded in Vasu Master's head due to only dreams. He discovered his loneliness as a cage bird.

Sometimes unfulfilled wishes are fulfilled in dreams. It is the wish of teacher that he should get stage to speak or to readout something and Vasu Master was no exception to this. He fulfilled his intensive desire to speak on the stage in a dream but it was much horrible. Infact, Vasu Master thinks why he gets fearful and shocking of dreams though they are absurd-only. Once he dreamt that he was reading out his notes from his essay 'Four Decades in Classroom' at a gathering in P.G. There were rows of chairs, Veera Naidu was on the stage, students and teachers were present. Veera Naidu glorified Vasu Master in his speech as one of the noblest missionaries in sacred profession. He spoke about Vasu Master:

He has served our school with devotion for a life time. But even more important, he has gone about his teaching duties with sense of mission.⁶⁰

When Vasu Master stood up to speak, he plunged his hand into his pocket to take out his lecture notes, he found that he was

unclothed. One boy, Raman handed him papers. He didn't know how he forgot to cloth himself on an important day. He told story of a king Chief Dauntelss Saviour who went to forest leaving his kingdom, forgot his reputation, his titles and evrything. Vasu Master discovered that after retirement, the degrees, titles have no value because it is beginning of new life. Though Vasu Master was naked, all heard him in pindrop silence. But he regrets when he heard from Gopu the situation of teacher and teaching where Gopu said :

There are no teachers left, I heard. Only the authorities ;their lackeys and fence-sitters; and a helpless,confused mob. I heard about cheating, paper leaks bribes, capitation fees, puppets, figureheads, rival unions, framings, pay-offs, and kickbackers bargains, demands negotiations.⁶¹

He got news from Gopu about P.G. that all the teachers had gone on strike. The annual function of P.G. was cancelled. The teachers, parents, pupils had rushed towards Veers Naidu's office

shouting slogans about bribes and donations. To build new laboratory, Veera Naidu has cancelled teachers' increments for three years. Two teachers were retrenched and one was suspended with false charges. Vasu Master felt sorry at this news. Because of his dream, Vasu master could do survey of all these matters.

Once Vasu Master dreamt about Mani. In his dream, he notices Mani in a small balcony crouching on the floor like a wounded animal. Vasu Master got shocked and ran in the balcony, tried to take him into his arms but something prevented him from doing that. Once again he went into the balcony, picked him, raised his head and thought for a minute as his own son Vishnu. From this dream, his love for Mani is revealed.

The next time, he dreamt of a woman standing on seashore. He could not see her face because she didn't turn around. Then he thought that she might be Mangala, Elimma or Jameela. Then he saw a child in his dream whose face, eyes, nose began to fade away. When Vasu Master wake up from his sleep, he was alone on the floor, his face was wet with sweat because he saw in dream Mani departed from him. His nostalgic feelings are revealed here :

I woke up and found myself on the floor, not the bed. I reached out for the damp, crumpled sheet and wiped my wet face. It was as if Mani had faded away, melted into the empty air, leaving me alone in the room.⁶²

To test Mani's progress, Vasu Master set an examination paper, which was unusual and different than P.G. He set ten questions in his question paper. He came to know that the mission he has undertaken is futile, because by living in a hole like Grey Mouse, one can't do progress. He says :

The essay will, I know now, never be written, while I live and be written, while I live and struggle in my own small way, in a corner, the essay can never be finished; never be an authoritative, seminal work.⁶³

He determines to try a new diet that doesn't consist of old ideas. He says :

I can try a new diet that does not consist entirely old ideas. The same state leftovers to be eaten day after day.⁶⁴

He has left the notebook as well as many other things also. He laid down his pen at last. The self discovery has no end because after death, no one can discover what happened after his death. So Vasu Master says :

I hear a voice from among you ask : Is this the end of the story ? It is, it could be, if I could also say the story is complete. But just when I am done with remembering, when I round it all off, put an end to it, I see that flash again, the burst of light when everything blurs for a second.⁶⁵

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