

# The Fire-Walking

Tony Voss

Writer

On Saturday morning Leila and I had arranged to go with Obed and Walleto to watch the fire-walking for the Kavadi festival at the Second River Temple in Bellair Road. After only a couple of hours' sleep, I was still tired, but I wrote a short note to Sister le Feuvre, expressing my sympathy for her loss and explaining, in unclassified terms, my connection, such as it was, with her father.

We took the Pulsar despite its having proved so recalcitrant, and to offset the mistrust in not taking Leila's Rover, and drove down to Albert Street to fetch Obed. He was dressed exactly as he would be if he were catching the bus to the Institute on a workaday morning, and he seemed keen to talk about the progress of the tests, but I asked him to save it all for Monday and we turned along the Esplanade to the art deco block where Walleto had an apartment. I had not seen Walleto for a while. He had been badly shaken up by his uncle's death, and Leila had invited him out to help him deal with his grief and rage. Waiting for us on the pavement, he looked characteristically Bohemian and colonial, wearing a safari suit and a peaked cap decorated with a badge showing Barbarella riding a red dragon, and an extensive sun-flap hung protectively around his neck and ears. He carried an elaborate and ruthless-looking camera. We set out down the South Coast Freeway before turning west along Edwin Swales V.C. Drive and then on to Bellair Road.

The new teaching hospital towers over the whole area now, but the temple has undergone enough history, so much large-scale and small-scale violence, all the bleak landscaping and social engineering of group areas, freeways, overways, underways, canals, bridges, electricity pylons and sub-stations, in its short century of life. The pantheon of Hindu deities has survived at a price: here at the southern end of Cato Manor, it is hard to recall the hectares of tin shacks that once covered the whole valley, the hundreds of thousands of families moved north and south, the violent riots and their equally violent suppression. After decades of flowing like a wide green river from north to south just west of the city, the valley has filled up again with shacks from the north. Cato Manor Road divides the informal settlements of the valley from the rate-paying suburbs on the east. There are rumours of war-lords and rack-rentiers.

None of this is visible as we walk from Bellair Road on to the dirt track that leads into the temple complex. Two fire-walking pits have been dug at the base of the hill



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on which the school and the temple stand. The rectangular shapes of the fuel are still clear below and within the leaping red flames. Hesitantly forming into groups, a number of devotees who have already committed to tread the coals hover around the heat. Ahead of us the crowd is closing behind the procession of the faithful carrying a spectacular wooden contrivance in honour of the lord *Subramanya* and the mother *Draupadi*. Their burden, extravagantly decorated with marigolds and feathers, is the *kavadi*, from which are suspended pots of milk and rice as offerings to the gods. This *kavadi* has come a long way from the river from which it set out at dawn and here its way though the crowd is lined by other devotees carrying large decorated brass pots, filled with water and overflowing with flowers. The music of voice, drum, bell and flute is exciting in its rapid rhythm and endless melodic line. The intense heart of the occasion for the moment beats in the many and scattered half-naked figures whose upper bodies are peppered with metal: hooks and needles and nails gleam even more brightly than the sweating skin through which they pierce. One man is drawing a heavy hand-made cart by a meat-hook though the shallow flesh of his back: another shuffles along on naked feet strapped to sandals of nails. I am stretching to look over many heads when the ebb of the crowd pushes the person immediately in front of me into my arms. Leila is at my shoulder and together we gently lower the featherweight body towards the ground. I look down into the face of a young woman whose eyes are glazed, her mouth open and her tongue transfixed by a gleaming skewer. But the brief relapse re-launches her into the floating dance of possession, and Leila and I close up the gap left by the wraith's departure.

The green slope before us is draped with the brightly-coloured cloth of a crowd dressed for the most part in saris or long white shirts and trousers: the impressionist patchwork almost touches the sculpted relief of the eastern façade of the temple, which is still catching the late morning sun. We can hear the singing of prayers of worship and supplication, the breathing of drums and the ringing of bells. The scent of the slowly flattening fires mingles with the fragrance of curry, *dahl* and *nahn*. As we approach the hill the competing sounds of the ice-cream lorries and mineral water vendors recede. In and out of the crowd of spectators moves the long procession of the possessed, who have been fasting for days, awake since before dawn, their heart-beat quickened by the insistent music. In the eyes of the other worshippers these have been invaded by the god. In time with the deep, irresistible beat of the drums, they are bearing their burdens to the temple: the splendid and garish *kavadi*, the burnished and refulgent bowls of the *goron gon*, their own need and faith and pain, all the needles and skewers and hooks that pierce the skin on to the threshold of fire.

Despite, or because of, the crowd, we decide to make our way up the hill towards the temple, and move easily through the sympathetically flexible press of people. We move as if by choice but the crowd carries us. The anticipation of the encounter with the god, the concentration of people and the gradual heat of noon paradoxically both unite and individualise the crowd. Whether or not we believe, we all ask ourselves "Will I walk the fire?" So the faces of individuals both stand out from and contribute to the total impression. Near the bottom of the hill I recognise Froneman.

"Are you walking, Mr. Froneman?"

"No, man. I'm here on duty. I'm looking out for Patel, he's walking". Froneman is wearing the uniform of a Red Cross volunteer.

Here and there among the colours and whites and sheens of the saris there are smart casual outfits (the uniform that admits patrons to the Musgrave restaurants), safari suits, denim.

Leila, Obed, Walter and I are lucky: we find a spot between the doors of the temple and the tall concrete *kodi* pole from which a small tree-goddess seems to ac-

knowledge her colleagues gazing eastwards out from the temple façade. We have a clear view over the pits: workers lean patiently on rakes waiting for the planks, timber-yard rejects or the skeletons of coastal settler bungalows, to subside into coals. Above us the gods wait to join their mortal embodiments in the flame. Deities in their hundreds: two huge guardians flanking Ganesa; the many-headed peacock-mounted *Subrahmanya*; *Shiva* and *Parvati* riding the bull; *Vishnu*, smiling among many consorts, appears now and again along the frieze, here lost in the embrace of *Laksmi*, there seated under the sheltering cobra, recurring as if in a dance, choreographed in stone and cement. The pantheon mocks all categories: gods blossom into mundane transformations of themselves, mortals live for ever, monarchs sing and beg in the streets, the spirit runs like a current through all the forms and ambiguities of the created world. To look up from here is to look down: the sculpture, like the sari-dotted company, both absorbs and highlights the individual figures. Among the temple-haunting gods and animals are recognisably local traders, artisans and housewives, uniformed civil servants and soldiers. Those in the know would identify the likenesses of the patron's family. I am half expecting to recognise Philip McEdon or the Hundred Percent Boys.

By now the sun is directly overhead, there is no wind, the smoke from the pits rises vertically into a vacant sky and I am grateful for my dark glasses and the old cricket hat which I have brought with me. Pulling the brim down I gaze out at the crowd, which stretches from all around the temple down the slope to the tarred road, lined in both directions with parked cars. People are still streaming into the sanctuary. We will be here at least until the sun sets behind us. I adjust my sights to the variable perspective of the crowd. For one moment I sense that I am being watched: I search systematically around me trying to identify the eyes I am feeling. From the corner of my circling gaze I catch a glimpse of reflected light moving away. The flash comes from a pair of dark glasses worn by a tall woman separated from me by a few metres of crowd. Her lime-green sari is draped around her head, wound around her waist, and falls to the ground; she cuts a striking figure, and I stare at her in an effort to make her look my way, but she is statuesque. It is only when I recognise the young man next to her as Ganymede that I realise I am looking at Ada Mastra. On her far side I can make out the clerically gnomonic figure of Metro Max. He is wearing a dark Mao jacket with scrambled egg collar. I would not be surprised to see Ada suddenly lifted shoulder-high by the crowd around her, to reveal herself as an idol of the pantheon.

Within the overall spill of colour and pointillism that is the crowd there are patches of white, brown, grey: where the canvas has been left stretched and sized, primed or washed over with some serviceable base. In these less colourful spaces hover spectators like us, not dressed in any way to look like devotees or even adherents, some still in the uniform of their trade or calling: bus-drivers, nurses, municipal workers, policemen. We all know that once the procession reaches the temple and leaves its gifts, the road of fire will be open.

A change in the rhythm of the music and a long ringing of bells signal that the time has come. The crowd re-adjusts itself to focus on the fire-pits. Those who have already made their commitment to the coals, gather at the northern end of the cleared spaces that are opening up around the beds of heat. Saris and loin-cloths seem to have retained crisp whiteness and clarity of colour.

“You know, Daniel, no satisfactory scientific explanation has ever been offered for the fact that fire walkers apparently suffer no pain, in many cases no burns”.

“Well, you could say that religious ecstasy generates temporary insensibility”.

“Ah yes, colleague, but that would be to shift the terms of our discussion: ‘ecstasy’ is not a scientific term”.

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“Perhaps not, but it refers to an observable state. I’m sure you would find significant metabolic changes in the celebrants before and after their *pyromachia*: heart-rate, body-temperature, blood-pressure. All would prove to be abnormal before the event, and would return quite rapidly to normal afterwards. In that sense ‘ecstasy’ is empirically observable, and hence scientific. The individual is taken out of the self by the process of dedication and walks over fire in the person of a god, distanced from his or her own body”.

“Ingenious, Daniel. But that is the argument of a metaphysician rather than a scientist. You are in the line of descent from Samuel Alexander, with whom I always thought twentieth-century metaphysics had passed away. At least, you are working with Alexander’s primary categories of matter, life and mind”.

“Obed, I’ve never read Samuel Alexander. You’ll have to explain some other time”.

The music was loud again and marshals were directing devotees to follow orders in their approach to the glowing beds. Some had almost to be carried: they showed no resistance but seemed simply to have left the mortal forms of their personal embodiment behind. In the end, the walkers followed a sequence of their own.

“I may have time now for a brief exposition”.

The first walker is a middle-aged woman who holds her bearing all the way across the coals. She has no need of the foot-basins of water waiting at the further end, and disappears at once into the spectators. She is followed by a various crowd that starts as a continuation of the procession, gradually slowing down to allow devotees on to the field of fire singly or in pairs.

“Here we are, all of us, in space-time, the cosmic system: observers, participants, temple, grass, fire. This is the manifestation of order as we can apprehend it now. At one level, this is simply matter, but we can see that it is matter with life, and we can be assured that there is mind here too. Mind is one, and only one, of our primary categories, but it enables the system to understand itself and it is that category which makes the whole system capable of, and manoeuvres it towards, Deity”.

Obed, at my ear, is clearly audible in the melisma of music, chanting, shouts of encouragement and screams at the intensity of experience itself. The stream of fire-walkers is constant and uninterrupted for what seems to be a long time.

“Mind, uniquely, has the property of consciousness, and mind does not necessarily lodge in individuals, but consciousness is what enables mind to achieve Deity, which is the end to which our whole system is tending. So the consciousness of this event, of this stage on the journey towards Deity, is not yours or mine, but ours: we are all tending towards Deity; those on the fire, those in the earth, those at the water and those in the air”.

Obed, like the first fire-walkers, has taken his time. He has finished what he wanted to say and there is no distraction: his brief disquisition is an essential part of what the day is becoming, and I know that Obed’s silence is a beginning and not an ending. I will have questions to ask, of myself, if not of him: more probably of both. The festival has reached the limit of its parabolic approach to Deity. For the moment, as if at a signal, with the last phrase of Obed’s Alexandrine interlude the pyro-pilgrimage has lost its processional quality, become more haphazard and been joined by the less rigorously prepared, by some caught up in the rush or challenge of the moment, who gather the skirts of their saris or roll up their jeans or neatly pressed grey flannel trousers and scuttle across the cooling sacred hearth.

Is the fire-walking a manifestation of the battle between Vishnu and Shiva? Over the destructive element we walk, maintaining our *dharma*, our dignity and our balance.

(From an unpublished novel)

Tony Voss was born in Swakopmund in 1935. He went to school at St. George's Grammar School, Cape Town, and graduated from Rhodes University and the University of Washington, and Seattle. He taught in universities until his retirement from the University of Natal in 1995, since when he and his wife Carol have lived in Sydney. His first collection of poems, *The Mushroom Summer of Skipper Darling*, was published by Crane River Press in 2019.

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