

“Afsaneh in Persian means ‘fairy tale,’ says Afsaneh. She sits in her beautiful Japanese style home a stone’s throw from her guest house and talks about her life, her work, and her childhood dreams.

“My life began in Persia, or Iran, as it is now called. When I was 6 years old my father emigrated to Germany. I was put in a Jesuit Girl’s School and as a Muslim was treated badly, so when I was 13, my father agreed that I could convert to Catholicism.” At 15, Afsaneh met the long-haired revolutionary, Jacob. “He had been to Auroville in 1968 and back in Germany he had become the local guru. This was the sixties and young German people were searching for something else in their lives. I was never a real hippie, but my contact with Jacob and his way of thinking gave me a push to explore other ways of being.” She married Jacob at 18. “I had to become a Jew as Jacob was from a very traditional Jewish family. So I went through three religious traditions in 12 years!” Afsaneh pauses for breath, and then explains how she came into contact with The Mother.

“When I was a young teenager someone gave me a copy of Huta’s *White Roses* and every sentence of it touched my heart. Having lived with all these religions, suddenly this peace came upon me that was not connected with religion. I had been overloaded with religion all my life. I said ‘Yes, yes’, that is all I want, just this direct connection with the heart.’ That was my first direct link to The Mother, and later, to Auroville.”

When Afsaneh and Jacob divorced in 1978 she saw her chance to finally go to Auroville. “Jacob had talked about this place in South India which was trying to create a new world and where you could create a new world for yourself. I had always felt very lonely in Germany; everything seemed cold after the warmth of Iranian society and I longed to put down roots somewhere meaningful.” For several months she travelled around India before arriving in Auroville in 1979. She remembers her first moment in Auroville: “I stood under the banyan tree and then I felt a lightning shock go through my body. My friend said I screamed out ‘Home, home!’ I felt that I was, finally, at home.”

“Looking back I realize I had always lived in communities. In Iran I had grown up in a family with five uncles and my mother and then I spent ten years in a boarding school, so it seemed a very natural way for me to live. It took several years of coming and going between India and Germany to wind my life down there, but on the 4th of January 1981, I became an Aurovillian.”

Afsaneh lived for a while in a keet hut where the Town Hall now stands, then moved to Kottakarai. “In the early days, I slept under the big neem tree that still gives me shelter, then someone said to me, ‘This is your place’ and I knew exactly what they meant.” Afsaneh had lost what little money she had, but a friend who owed her some cash gave her a sack of shiny beads and she started Bijou workshop, making beaded items to sell. “Bijou is still going strong after 12 years and Gillian is running it. Then I started to do massage and I believe I was the first therapist in Auroville, though at the time I think many people wondered what was going on up here.”

In 1985 Afsaneh went back to Germany to see her father with whom she had a strong and loving connection. “He came from a long line of healers in Iran and his Farsi name is on the Guest House sign,

A dream come true



PHOTO COURTESY AFSANEH

Afsaneh

‘Afsaneh Mohebbi Guest House’. He is still remembered in Auroville as a visiting chiropractor who treated the bad backs of many Aurovillians.” Inspired by her family tradition, Afsaneh trained in Germany for three years to become a Heilpraktiker practitioner, then afterwards as a bio-resonance therapist and chiropractor.

“I asked my father if he would help me to build a new workshop for Bijou. He generously consented, and in 1985 Poppo the architect, came to start the building. An observant Sufi friend passing through said; ‘You are a born host; why don’t you create a guest house instead of a workshop?’ and that is exactly what I did.”

“The original guesthouse had five rooms and a dining room, and in 1989 my dear father came and inaugurated the *Afsaneh’s Guest House*.”

“One of my dreams was to create a beautiful place where Aurovillians’ parents could stay when they came to visit their children and where I could make them feel welcome. Also, so they could see we were not all hippies living in a forest and they could feel more reassured about their children’s life choice.”

She is proud that she never had to take any money from Auroville for her projects. “My father always helped me as he could see how happy I was in Auroville. This also brought us close together as he felt involved. Now I feel good that I can contribute

the money we make on the guest house to the Central Fund.

“Through my daughter Mirani, who was born here in 1983, I became aware of the problems facing the Auroville kids who were growing up in such an isolated place. In those days the food in Auroville was limited and I used to feed the kids with food from the Guest House kitchen, so I got to know many of them rather well. Like my daughter, they too were born here and many of them needed to go abroad for education as the schools were still developing at that time. They needed to learn skills as the training here was limited. So every time I had the chance of going to Germany, I took some of them with me to work and study. This brought me much satisfaction.

“It was so important for them to come back with skills to offer the community. However, I see that often when they come back ‘home’ they do not have anywhere to live. They cannot build their own house and don’t want to live in a room as they don’t feel they are Newcomers. They have their dream, like we did, and we should be aware of that and create a situation which is attractive for them.

“I was very happy to finally return to Auroville in 1999 with my professional skills. I now spend three days of the week working down by the sea in the beautiful Quiet Healing Centre and the other days organizing the guest house. This is a perfect balance for me. I could not do this without the help of my manager, Baskar, a wonderful Tamil man from the village who is now an Aurovillian whom I have trained and on whom I depend completely.

“I feel very satisfied with the new dining room and guest house that Poppo built in the Japanese style. This is the 3rd one built on this spot. It has taken me 25 years to have a house that I have helped to design and I love living in it. I also get great satisfaction from seeing the guests’ pleasure in the beautiful gardens and rooms here. Europeans feel very comfortable as it is so clean and Indian guests are amazed by the Zen garden and efficiency of everything. Many people come for peace and rest and it is good to be able to provide that for them.”

“One of the main perks of running a Guest House,” says Afsaneh, “is that it makes you feel connected with the big world outside Auroville. I find that living with the same 2,000 people year after year can get limiting so this is a wonderful chance for me to meet all sorts of interesting people. It brings gusts of fresh air into my life.”

In the dining room are a group of head-scarfed Iranian women, laughing and talking together. “Their tour organizer was driving around Auroville last year and was lost in our forest. Suddenly he saw the sign of my guest house written in Farsi. He couldn’t believe his eyes! Now he has brought these women who are on an Indian pilgrimage and they are very touched by this Iranian connection in the middle of South India. I took them to Matrimandir and some of them wept with emotion and told me they will never forget this place.

“Now I realize why my sweet auntie gave me my Iranian name ‘Afsaneh’. She knew I would fulfil the ‘fairy tale’ – I am so happy I have been able to bring it to fruition in Auroville, the home of my soul.”

Dianna

AUROVILLE WRITING

Jogging Through the Auroville Countryside, One December Afternoon

Against the cereal-like profile, screened by an embankment, On a path radiant with light, stood the witness, with bared breast and barefoot.

He had not met a soul, and everything was yielding to the soul’s pressure.

Then he turned: at the other end of the field, not far from the place where he had once raised the hackles of a couple of baying killers, a cautious dog, of no particular breed, was watching him unmoving. He felt bound to it by a kind of kinship. But above all, above all, perfuming the prudent valour of the ultra-modest cereals – even humbler than buckwheat or rye – ran the silvery relay of crickets, a singing perfusion into the blood of the world.

Their modulated shrillings create a kind of hypnosis, a little like a cat’s purr. Crickets populate spaces where nature is still alive. They commune throughout the immense course of a day, with the micro-seasons that punctuate it. Again and again they pass to each other the flute-like sound of a celebration. They possess the fibre of bright hours, even in the depths of the night. The fail but astonishing lively grace of their song lies poles away from the massed discordant choirs of the amphibian – something like Krishna’s omnipresent fluting: violinists of eternity, in the verdant court of the cosmic mansion. Songster-sorcerers of the fields, moving around on the spot, heralds who make a hut vibrate with ecstasy; “burrowers, omnivorous, lovers of warm dark places” says the dictionary – but I find that they love warm bright places. Nothing like locusts, whether sedentary or nomadic: these are pilgrims on the spot, like you, o stationary vagabond, rooted, rooted! Cornered on every side and free in a single point (a glowing point in the darkness). Let us listen to the spokesman of these numberless allies:

“We transmit the good wishes of eternity; our musical massage, whose wavelets you feel entering your body in procession, enchants the serpent of the air and makes it drowsy. Around us we create, for those who know how to hear us, a lake-chain of indrawn peace, of many-marvelled mini-amphitheatres. Charmed time continues to flow according to its appointed mission, but smoothly and with nonchalance, now and then curling back upon itself. The heavy tread of human brutes silences us. Out pet hate is agitation; we see to it that the air makes its journeying gentle, so that sometimes even the breeze is suspended for a moment, musing in the

crook of a cashew-tree or leaning against some globular jackfruit to listen to us. When the hot wind is unleashed you may notice that between two blasts one of us is always there, ringing its song of freshness. Our small size, our omnipresence, protect us from violation. Our Gregorian trillings form a gently rolling landscape, crowned with fervent hills. At the apogee of our inspiration, our perpetual Mass makes the hut-cathedral of the earth, whose piles plunges into infinity, slowly oscillate. This rocking, this sonorous open-hearted shimmer, is our personal note. Through us you might rediscover, without too much literature, a childlike echo of the rapture of spheres, or of the joy that dreamed the worlds.

“Certainly other creatures bear the same message, and hold a place of honour in the pigeonholed memory of poets, or in the suddenly poetic heart of lovers. That is because, you see, all dreams are one. You can bind us in one sheaf with all the other sonorous enchanters, whether they form the soul of a grove of silvery olive trees, of a wild wellspring where the oleander grows, or, like a nightingale, transfigure on a night in May a little garden with a single tree, closed in by joyless houses, in a lost provincial town. But try never to forget that throughout your life, all your lives, we were here. In your truest hours, when you are face to face with your Origin, your soul dances on our silver thread. You are searching for gold, we know it well; you want to feel yourself again riddled with thousands of tiny windows, all lit up, all inhabited – a transposition onto your own body of casements, minuscule admittedly but innumerable, that we are ceaselessly opening up onto non-time. Gold is nothing astonishing to us – we are its heralds. We were heralding it to you already amongst the mountain meadows, on the first level where the morning sun halts for a moment on its mounting way to draw breath; we have spoken to you of it from every vegetation-zone where we could dwell; and even in the midst of a wasteground crenellated with rubbish and haunted by human refuse, we have put you in possession of your true memory. Sometimes we have spoken to you (always in the language of simplicity) as a thirst-quenching fire that stretches on and on into infinity amidst limitless fallow and ploughed fields, and at others as the repeated ratings of a small illuminated signboard whose persistence has helped you to get through the night.”

Thus spoke to me the King of Crickets, sonorous mate of the Queen of Fireflies, who are kin to falling stars. I

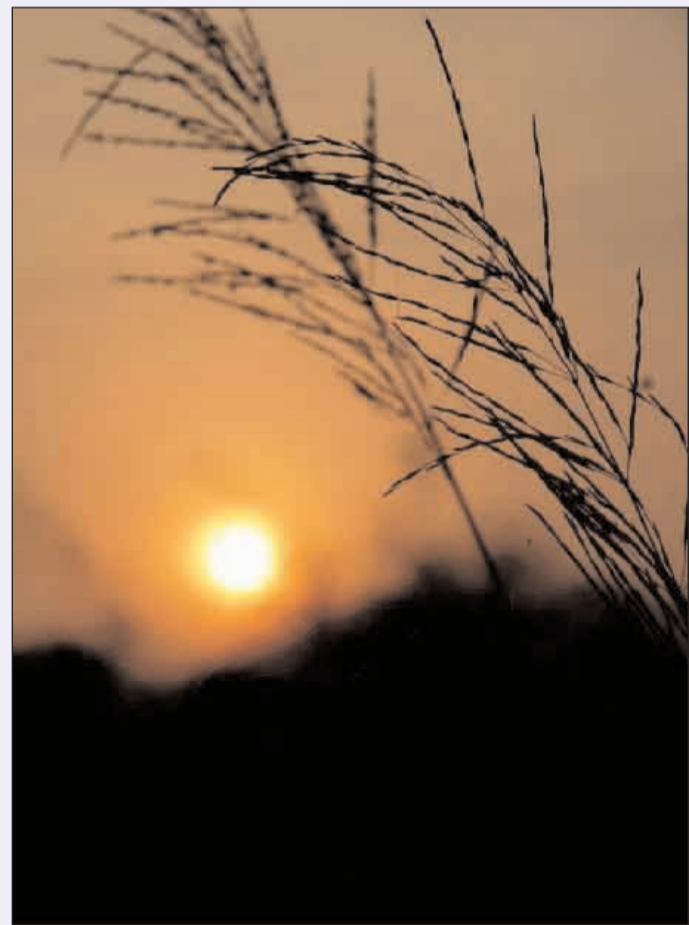


PHOTO COREN LINDFIELD

was in an open field where gleamed the discreet delight of silvery plumes lightly tinged with mauve emotion. On my body glazed with solar gold, the old tattoo marks had vanished.

I was tiptoeing away backwards, when to the comet of the passing moment was added the tail of a title: SILVER AND GOLD.

*written in the late 1980s by Raymond Thépot
Excerpted from ‘Real Utopias: Essays, Paradoxes, Short stories’
Translated into English by Shraddhavan*