

# Schumacher's Lens

Yahya Frederickson

Ceylon, 1944

**W**e dig latrines. Count mosquitoes dead in traps. Monitor bedbug infestation. An elephant drags a fridge into what'll become the camp PX. The mahout poses in its mouth like a teak log. Schumacher photographs them, photographs the workers passing rattan baskets brimming with dirt down their human chain. Photographs us playing baseball in the dust, our bodies lanky and brown as tamarind pods. Photographs us golfing at the Kandy Country Club. Our caddy Tungaville's good till noon, when he blows his rupees on rotgut and starts swaying on the green like a palm. Sometimes, a newsreel star visits camp. Glory days over, Jack Dempsey poses for photos, invites any GI to go a goodwill round. Schumacher photographs a private bluster into the ring. At first it's all smiles and shadow jabs. But as Dempsey turns to the crowd, the kid throws a sucker punch. A couple more and The Champ's had it. He clocks the kid, it's all over, like the war in Europe. On V-E Day, Kandy is one big parade—Gurkhas, Sikhs, Africans, Englishmen playing bagpipes and drums, WACs, Boy Scouts, ATS girls, everyone marching toward something. At the Temple of the Tooth, Schumacher photographs a bejeweled elephant lumbering down steps through the throng. A beggar with tangled limbs scuffing past on sandaled hands. Old women balancing brass urns on their heads as they hobble home. A skeletal man shouldering a barrel. A girl leaning against the scored, dribbling trunk of a rubber tree. A boy steering a pyramid of bread down the street. Women picking tea on a mountainside plantation. A snake charmer coaxing a cobra from a basket. A magician making a mango pit vanish. Below Mount Lavinia, on the beach dotted with palms,

Schumacher photographs me standing waist-high in warm waves, a crude surfboard tucked under my arm. How long, I wonder, how long before the Army discovers how we're spending the war?

### **India, 1945**

Do avoid crowds, the Army pamphlet says. Don't leave camp if Gandhi comes to town. We do spray for bedbugs, we do dig latrines. Schumacher's laid out with dysentery. On furlough in Bombay, I do buy postcards: Juhu Beach. Victoria Terminus. Sir Cowasji Jehangir Hall. Chowpatti from Malabar Hill. I don't see National Velvet at Eros Cinema. The queue snakes out the cream-and-crimson façade, down the street, out of sight. Next furlough, Agra, Schumacher photographs Muslim women who pull the ends of their hijabs over their mouths, scowl, and their boy escort shouting no photos with his hands. At the Taj Mahal, Schumacher lines the whole platoon up, symmetrical, even reverent, among the reflecting pools, thin cypress trees, onion domes, and minarets until a sandstorm obliterates everything. His snapshots can't match the drama of the doctored black-and-white postcards for sale: Taj at Sunset. Taj by Moonlight. On the edge of town, Schumacher photographs a sadhu, langota cinched around his crotch, who scales the high wall of a temple, says a prayer, and plummets into a shallow pool. He floats face down, limp as algae. We wait. When will he move? When will he breathe? The water calms around him. Is he alive? But then his fingers feel for the edge, and he pulls himself up. Giddy, Schumacher runs to him, rains rupees into his hand, then unstraps the camera, hands it to me, the first time he's ever let me shoot. I center him and the sadhu grinning, arms over each other's shoulders, and for a moment there can't be war. In Calcutta, Jeeps prowl Chowringhee Road. Schumacher photographs a rickshaw, the driver who trots us from the Brigade Grounds, where white cattle wander around Ochterlony Column, to the River Hooghly, where sandal-shaped boats sag beneath their loads, to a teeming

market, where Schumacher photographs untouchables, fishmongers, donkeys obscured under giant sacks of cotton, a corpse burning on a ghat. The smoke stings my eyes. When I reopen them, a beggar has dragged himself close, pinning me in place with his elephantine foot until I surrender.

### **Ledo Road, 1945**

On a billboard in Assam, a blonde Kali, bare limbs akimbo, warns: Curves / on / the / road / are / dangerous / too! The supply convoy halts. Another truck has slipped over the edge and rolled down the mountain, booming like a Naga log drum. Gray parakeets explode from the trees. The jungle steams and breathes. A Jeep mired up to its axles in mud is pulled free. Our engines idle all the way down Salween Gorge. In Yunnan, a herd of goats rounds the bend, three Chinese boys tending them. I share K-ration candy with the boys while Schumacher loads a new roll. Their clothes are home-sewn, their sandals made of cord. The boy on the left peers from beneath a paddy hat, one hand gripping his switch, the other pinching the candy. The middle boy in a Mao cap smirks as he points his switch at Schumacher, his other hand palming the candy like a magician. The boy on the right rests his paddy hat on his back like a shield, the candy already melting under his tongue. The road loops on, an endless tan ribbon. For every meal, the mess crew stews eggplant. We pass the wreckage of a Japanese Zero. Schumacher photographs the pilot still sitting, charred, in the cockpit. From here the land flattens all the way to Kunming, where the 3101<sup>st</sup> has an airport and a dispensary, where Chinese nurses named Rita and Vicki smile for Schumacher's lens.

**Yahya Frederickson's** books include *In a Homeland Not Far: New & Selected Poems* (Press 53, 2017), *The Gold Shop of Ba-'Ali* (Lost Horse Press, 2014), and *The Birds of al-Merjeh Square: Poems from Syria* (Finishing Line Press, 2014). A former Peace Corps volunteer and Fulbright scholar, he teaches at Minnesota State University Moorhead. His father, Loel Frederickson, served in the India-Burma-China theater during WWII.