

1 Retracing Routes: Manjari Seeds and Nutmeg Trees

The rough road to the manager's bungalow at Lahai Estate in Kerala winds its way up to the top of the hill between the rows of rubber trees that march in straight terraced lines around the sloping plantation. From the rubber tappers' spiral cuts in the dark grey bark, white latex drips slowly into the half coconut shells hanging below. The ancestors of these rubber trees (*Hevea brasiliensis*) grew quietly in the Brazilian rainforests, tapped only by indigenous people, before the demand for rubber disrupted and destroyed this way of life. When seedlings finally germinated and pushed through the soil of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in London – the great greenhouse of the British Empire – the days of the Amazonian wild rubber trade were numbered. Shipped in 1876 to Ceylon and Singapore, these first shoots of the British control of rubber started a dynasty of rubber trees across India and Malaysia, where indentured Tamil labourers were transported to work on the plantations. 'Imported men, an imported plant, and imported quinine to control malaria all combined to make the Malay States an embodiment of the ideal colony, and to make rubber the most satisfactory plantation crop in all of British controlled Southeast Asia' (Brockway, 2002: 164–165). The unexpected Tamil on today's street signs in Singapore was carried there to care for these transplanted trees.

It is this estate road that my mother drove down in 1933, leaving the lawns of Lahai where she had played with her pet rabbit, the mango tree where the monkeys used to come to eat the young fruit, the dark stone bungalow with its white beams supporting the red-tiled roof, the cool of the wide verandas either side of the living room, with its doors opening to the steps down to the lawn. She is setting off for England, a distant country she has visited but once before, the big black car winding down the road through the rubber trees – the luggage has gone ahead on a buffalo cart – past the tappers' huts by the roadside and on through Ranni, Mallappally and Kottayam,