

Non-fiction

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The Meaning of a Machete

ஒன்று

We say: *chedi, chedi*. First things first.

I find it difficult to write my name beside the name *Sri Lanka*, which by itself is a sound like chimes made of broken glass. Thinking of how my name would look beside it—my indecipherable signature, even my initials—raises fear in me like the sight of a white van at my door, the unnamed harbinger of disappearance and death. As though too closely identifying with the country that was never mine by birth makes me a visible target: guilty, somehow, of an accumulation of crimes I never saw, or saw only remaining evidence of: scars shaped like bullet-holes in the trunk of a palm tree, gutted houses with blackened walls, the earth still jagged with old shrapnel.

My mother likes to sing this song, *Que sera, sera; whatever will be, will be; the future's not ours to see; que sera, sera*. “A song my mother sang to me,” she says. “We used to sing it to imagine what our lives would be.” *We* means her sisters who still live in Sri Lanka, in Batticaloa where they were born.

My mother doesn't know French and spells it, in her spidery print, *Kesera-sera*—like a pretty girl's name being called by an importunate lover, as she walks away through the saffron-colored dust. I take French in high school and maybe I correct her mistake, but whenever I hear that song I picture a dark Tamil girl with a wooden bucket in her hand, in a village that shimmers with heat, walking into the jungle to collect water for washing.

If this were Vavuniya, or elsewhere in the Vanni, probably

she would never come back.

இரண்டு

I am born in 1983 in New York, the city of promise, education and my father's advanced degree, the city where my parents are trapped since war erupted in Sri Lanka earlier that year. There is no chance for them now of going home. There's a photo of me in the stroller, clutching my father's graduation cap to my head and showing a gap-toothed smile. This year my father collects Tamil newspapers that my mother won't read. They must have called Sri Lanka every night. Maybe they held the receiver to my mouth and waited for me to coo and gurgle for my relatives to hear. When my Paata was dying he was still asking when he would get to see me.

I don't know if he ever saw the photographs of me. When I visit Sri Lanka for the first time, I see Paata's framed and garlanded photograph hung on the wall, and one of my aunts touches my shoulder and tells me, “Say hello to him. He has wanted so badly to see you in life.”

As though he were still alive.

மூன்று

For a long time I believe *shells* are seashells; breasts that are cut off don't bleed; if you strap a bomb to your body you explode into a harmless shower, like a cloudburst in spring.

My parents are careful not to talk about this in front of me when I am growing up. Tamil is their language of secrecy, until I pick it up from context and can guess at every other word. Grocery lists. Phone calls. *Hiding in basements*. We move after my father gets his physics Ph.D., it is the early nineties and I am in grade school pretending to know the songs “What's the Frequency, Kenneth?” and “Informer” because I am in love with a girl who loves them.

Sometimes I hear my mother on the phone, *aiyo, aiyo*, a pale

cry like a woman weeping for her dead children, *oh god, god*, unable at this point to wonder what it would mean if God is not there to hear her.

It is 1994 and I think my life is over because I can't lip-sync with the radio. My best friend Kasia can. Most of the songs I know are in Tamil, and sometimes it is difficult for me to understand it is not a language most people know.

நான்கு

When we move to Louisiana there are whites and blacks in my high school, and I realize with a shock *I am brown*. I write *Sri Lankan-American* on all my college applications but *Tamil* as ethnicity doesn't occur to me until later, and for the longest time I think tigers with their golden slit-pupil eyes and orange-and-black are beautiful. When my parents buy me a full-size mattress I pick out a jungle-green bed set printed with loping tigers, their muzzles soft and mute. My mother's face tightens in shock when I show her the catalogue; her voice heated when she tells me, "Why do you want tigers on your bed? Don't you know what people will think?"

I said yes. Meant no.

It's almost funny to me now to think I sometimes go so far as to put the word tiger in print, how it loops in my mind like the Blake poem: "Tiger, Tiger, burning bright, in the forests of the night," only I think he may have spelled it with a *y*.

In Sri Lanka we capitalize *Tiger*—think of them as something equally fierce. Guerilla insurgents illuminating the jungles of the north and east with flashes of gunfire. After I see *Streetcar Named Desire* my senior year, I begin associating tigers with broken glass too, from the line, "Drop it, tiger—we've had this date from the beginning!"

There is no such thing as a black tiger, unless it is diseased or wearing a bomb.

There is no such thing as a yellow tiger at all.

ஆறு

I have been to Sri Lanka twice, the first time in 2002 with my whole family—my father who is *Appa*, my *Amma* who I mostly call *Mom*, and my little sister or *Thangachi*, but I have to call her by her name. She's the one I'm closest to, after all. They all call me *Akka*, big sister, because that is what I am.

I went back to Sri Lanka in 2004 with my mother, to write about the country until I could understand it, to extract meaning from the history of its conflict. "No, no," my relatives cajoled, "You don't want to write about the fighting, *chellam*; they will cut you if you do."

By *chellam* they meant sweetheart, by cut they meant kill. A machete blade vibrating against bone.

When they saw I wouldn't be swayed, Ahilan Uncle told me how his family was murdered, his father shot, his older brother cut down and tossed into a burning car, where he slowly roasted to death. I am afraid even to write that we think the Army did it, and really, it could have been the Tigers. This was something no one would initially confirm.

The only Sri Lankan city I really know is Batticaloa, where I stayed with my mother's family. We couldn't travel to see everyone we wanted to see, because there were some villages where violence happened every day and my parents were afraid. Raalkuli, where my father once lived, is one of these places. I think it must be a ghost town, now. Everyone fled to Batticaloa, which is flooded with refugees and, in some places, old blood.

ஐந்து

My Appa reads to me from *The Ramayana* when I am little. Most of what I can understand of it is that prince Rama is light-skinned, handsome, and good, and in love with light-skinned, beautiful princess Sita, and the enemy is Ravana, evil, ten-headed, handsome but dark-skinned, more powerful than the gods and filled

with greed. He steals Sita for his own, taking her to his palace in Sri Lanka to force her hand in marriage.

When we get to the part where Rama storms Ravana's palace and demands that a woman named Lanka allow him to pass, my Appa stops to explain: "Lanka is our Sri Lanka; that's where Ravana's palace is. She is the beautiful goddess who guards the country from evil."

"Okay," I say. I am puzzled by this idea of forced marriage, why men fight to the death over a beautiful woman, why Sita doesn't simply marry them both. Words I don't know: *sex*, *lust*, *jealousy*. I do know *pure*, and *virtue*, and *Surya* which is not a word but the name of fire: the thing that proves Sita's chastity, burns cow dung to holy white ash, falls from the skies in the shape of bombs.

Hanuman with his monkey-tail ablaze sets fire to the gardens and houses of Lanka to make Ravana come roaring out of his great hall. Ravana is said to have ruled there under the goddess's protection, hidden from the world—like the endgame of Sri Lanka's war. The deaths of forty thousand civilians erased in a black hole of media silence.

At the end of the epic, after Ravana is killed, they say of him, "He was a great and noble man." It is easy to say this in hindsight. Even easier if someone has a gun to your head and is asking your opinion.

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When I travel to Batticaloa for the second time in 2004 I am carrying in my backpack a sheaf of ruled loose-leaf paper, a bundle of black-ink pens, a deck of playing cards to keep myself entertained on the flight to Colombo, Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, and Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, the latter jammed into the bottom of my bag because he is Sri Lankan and I don't know what the customs authorities will think of him.

At customs I say, "I'm visiting family for a few months," and

hold my face still until my passport is stamped. I remember what it is like to be held up at checkpoint by guns. When you believe your life is over, fear is overtaken by calm. You listen to your heartbeat. You don't even realize it at first, when they lower their guns and nod for you to pass through.

Ever since that checkpoint moment, I've been awaiting the way it *didn't* end: my abduction, my rape, my death, my postmortem defilement. This is the palpable thing in the room with me as I hunch over my computer, scouring gore sites for images because I am not there and I have to know. What does a suicide bomber look like, exploded? When a rubber tire is filled with gasoline, placed around your neck, and lit: what remains of your face? Enough to identify, under charred cheek and tendon, the taut, final scream. Even when the face is unrecognizable—shattered, teeth like pebbles in a mess of blood, or blown off, or smashed in, or smiling—it howls, always, like a rabid dog.

I stop sleeping. I wonder if this could have been me. If I'm not completely covered at night I feel it in my skin, death, everywhere. The way it might have gone.

This was my plan: to not ask questions. To not stare. To not attract attention, in my American jeans with my New York-Midwest-deep-South tongue, with my body. In Colombo, Sinhalese boys will cheerfully catcall from street corners if they see a pretty face in a car. In Kilinochchi pretty faces are in the Tiger troops. In Batticaloa they disappear into Karuna's faction, or the cemeteries. In Black July in 1983, Black September in 1990, the burning of Trincomalee, 1987, they were dragged from vehicles, raped, chopped with machetes, and burned. Tamil or Sinhalese. Pretty or not.

As for Ondaatje, I've been told they don't think of him at all.

எட்டு

If you can call hallucination thinking, I have been thinking of a corpse since 2003—a white man, whiter in death, with green eyes that burn like swamp fire. His right leg is truncated at the knee. On the other, the foot has been ripped away, bones and dry strings of marrow and tendon poking through the stump. There is a meat hook sunk deep into his thigh and he dangles from it, his long black hair fanning the ground, blood in his teeth when he crooks a broken finger at me and tells me, “You could look like this too, if you’d only let yourself go.”

In Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* comics, Death is a character who says, “Your life is your own. So is your death.” In 2003 my death would have been spread-eagled slumber, a bellyful of pills, except I opened my eyes and saw him writhing on his hook, and all the faceless burn victims of Black July. I felt clarity. I knew them all. I opened my mouth, and screamed myself alive.

Death says: “Mythologies take longer to die than people believe.”

Wherever I go, there he is. Pretending to be my death. Trying to be alive.

பத்து

I realize now that these numbered sections are wrong. This Tamil number is 10, but there are pieces missing here: an inadvertent jump between 4 and the one that comes next. I’ve already forgotten which letter means what, or how to rearrange them in a way you will understand. I rely more than I want to on the idea that understanding can provide a solution that is more than a quick-fix, or that there could be a solution at all; that understanding could balance the equation of scars on my body and where they are placed.

Most of them are self-inflicted, though some have elaborate

mythologies so evolved that I no longer remember their true origin.

ஒன்பது

There are things we do not talk about. Things we aren’t supposed to know. Things that have been told and retold so many times that they have lost the edge of their truth.

In February 2004 I am in Sri Lanka and the news shows me an image of a head, leftovers from a claymore mine. The blood seared out of the tattered neck, but the expression intact, lips compressed into a rigid line of serene. It is surprising how explosions leave you mostly whole. How bloodless death can be. How green this country is, and how alive with the heavy oils of fried fish and paper-dosa from the roadside stands, the ripe orange smell of mango flesh, the cinnamon-colored dirt that gathers under your toenails and doesn’t wash clean.

How the sound of spoken Tamil is a second birth, or a voyage into the ocean past the allowance of light, where fish cradle themselves and wait for nourishment to drift down from the surface, patient enough to simply be.

How Ahilan Uncle wields his machete, gently and without malice, as he stands on the rooftop and cuts jackfruit from the stem, calling down to me to ask how many I want, as I watch the rusted edge breaking through the leaves with a red-silver light, and the leaves splitting apart as if cut by fire.