



AN ANTHOLOGY

**WRITE TO RECONCILE III**

# WRITE TO RECONCILE III

## *An Anthology*

Edited by Shyam Selvadurai



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## *Introduction*

Last fall, in Toronto, I went to see a play that was written by one of the writers in this anthology, Sindhuri Nandakumar. The play was called *A Crease in my Sari* and told the story of a young Sri Lankan Tamil woman, born and raised in Canada who found herself in a relationship with a Sinhalese man, whom she had met in the coffee shop. The young woman, Maheshwari, had been purposely raised by her mother in a western suburb of Toronto, away from other Tamils who generally live in the eastern suburbs. So, apart from one Tamil friend, she had no real contact with her community and heritage. Now, however, finding herself falling in love with this Sinhalese man, Chanaka, she also found herself confronted with the realities of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Chanaka, with all the naïve optimism that majority communities can afford to have, believed that love conquers all and that their ethnic difference was no barrier. This was partly his charm for her.

But the history of the country both young people had left was insistent, and it would not allow either of them to ignore it. It was the winter of 2009 and the war in Sri Lanka was in its last phase. Soon, Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto were protesting against the Sri Lankan government, most famously carrying out a sit-down in the middle of a Toronto expressway. Maheshwari discovered that Chanaka's father was in the army, and that Chanaka believed this was a just war, a humanitarian effort with zero casualties. As the play progressed, Maheshwari grew increasingly politicised and, in the end, their relationship was unable to bear the weight of history.

After the show as I walked to the train, I was lost in thought remembering my own thoughts and feelings during those months in 2009; remembering how I didn't want to join the Tamil protesters because they were protesting under the Tiger flag, but how I also couldn't join the counter-protest by the Sinhalese in Toronto, as they had taken up the zero casualties-humanitarian approach, which I found ridiculous.

I hadn't thought about those months in a long time. In fact, I hadn't considered them as constituting a "memory", by which I mean something that one recalls as a seminal moment, something worth mulling over. The protests

and news from Sri Lanka had taken their place in the daily busyness of my life - made up of teaching, marking papers, shovelling snow, waiting in the freezing cold for buses, cooking, shopping, cleaning, going to the opera and theatre, and reading some good books. A good part of those months was spent worrying about the health of my ailing aunt, making many long trips to an eastern suburb to help her cope, taking turns with my sisters in the hospital when she was admitted for a few weeks. All these realities diluted the effect of the protests and the end of the war.

Yet now, because of the play, those months had become a “memory” – a historic moment I had lived through. Because of the play, the memory of my thoughts and feelings and awareness of the ending war had detached themselves from the multiple distractions and busyness of my days, as lived in that time, and become crystallised as a memory. The moment had become metaphorized.

This is what good narrative does. It takes an experience or moment in history, isolates it from the quotidian business of living, and holds it up to us – that moment now glistening like a newly cut gem. The experiences of the young man and woman in the play were very different from my own. I was much older than them, for one. Unlike the woman, I was born and brought up in Sri Lanka and had, over the years, maintained contact with the country. Unlike her, I was very clear on what my position was during those last months of the war. Unlike the young man, I had no naivety about what was going on in Sri Lanka. And yet, different as our experiences were, the narrative I had seen unfolding on the stage had rung a bell in me; had brought to the surface my own experience of that historical moment, lifted now out of the soil of the mundane. Good narrative does this. It opens up our own memories and feelings and helps crystallise them.

It is my hope that this anthology performs a similar function for you. Though the experiences you read about might be very different from your own, I hope reading these pieces lifts your own experience of the war and post-war period out of the mud of daily existence and raises it up to the light. I hope that you keep these memories with you, because to forget them means that our violent shared history runs the risk of repeating itself.

This is the third year of *Write to Reconcile* and very likely its last. It is hard to believe that this project, which I conjured up in 2012, ever came to fruition, and even harder to believe that there have been three instalments of *Write to Reconcile*, each producing an anthology of work about the war and post-war situation.

For those of you who are not familiar with *Write to Reconcile*, a short word on it: the project was born out of my belief that good literature has the power to heal wounds in a situation like Sri Lanka's, by initiating a conversation between its divided communities. Good literature gives people a chance to look into the lives and experiences and points of view of the "other"; gives them a chance to see the "other" as human just like them, with points of view that, although different from their own, are also valid.

At the beginning of each *Write to Reconcile*, we put out an island-wide call for applications and selected participants to represent a diversity of experiences – ethnic, religious, geographic, and economic. The project was open to Sri Lankans living in the country and from the diaspora between the ages of 18-29. It was also open to all Sri Lankan teachers and professors, as I hoped that the creative writing craft I taught during the programme would be used by them in their classrooms. The entire programme was free of charge. At the beginning of each *Write to Reconcile*, the selected participants met for a week-long residential workshop, during which they got to know each other and also learnt the craft of creative writing from me. We made it a point to hold these workshops in different parts of the island with the goal of exposing participants to the different ways the war affected different communities.

Past *Write to Reconcile* workshops were held in Colombo, Jaffna, Kandy, and Batticaloa. This year, the residential workshop took place in Anuradhapura, because I was keen to expose participants to the Sinhala border villages and the Vanni, in the hopes that the experiences of these people might be reflected in the anthology – either directly, or as a felt experience transformed into another context. The Vanni, where the last phase of the war was fought, bears the deepest scars of the war. We were very lucky to meet so many people there who were willing to share their experiences with us, to let us into their lives and painful histories. I think we were all deeply moved and changed by this experience.

Following the residential workshop, each year *Write to Reconcile* conducted an online forum where every participant workshopped two pieces of writing. This year, I introduced an innovation to the forums by allowing a selected amount of diaspora participants, who had not attended the residential workshop, a chance to participate exclusively online. I felt this change increased access for diaspora participants, many of who do not have the means or the time to fly to Sri Lanka. Following the online forums, each participant picked one of their submissions and worked with me to refine it for this anthology.

One of the questions I am often asked is how *Write to Reconcile* has influenced and changed my own writing. This is a difficult question to answer because “influence” works in a strange and indirect way. Often it takes many years for a period or important incident to work its way into my fiction. So, time and distance are necessary before I will be able to know how this program has affected my own work.

There are, however, some things I can say about how *Write to Reconcile* has changed me as a person. Before I started this project, I had very little contact or even access to other Sri Lankans outside my own family and social circles. Sri Lankans outside of my social world seemed as foreign as non-Sri Lankans. I didn’t know how to bring myself, with my own sets of beliefs, attitudes and personality, into interaction with these other Sri Lankans. The 74 participants I have worked with over the three *Write to Reconcile* programmes were carefully selected to represent the widest spectrum possible of Sri Lankans. They have, through their generous goodwill, given me a chance to learn how to bring myself into an easy relationship with Sri Lankans different from myself. I have also gotten to know the thoughts and feelings of the younger generation, all of who were born and raised during the war and to whom this post-war period – which was the “normal” my generation longed to return to – is strange and abnormal. I have gotten to know these 74 people not so much in a social way but, rather, through editing their work. You really do get to know the mind and soul of a person when you pore over their words for long periods, when you spend a lot of time in the worlds they have created, absorbing their unique vision and then helping them shape and sharpen that vision. It is a very profound way of “knowing”. It is this “knowing” I take with me from the project, this feeling that I have lived and experienced these other different realities; which has also made me socially at ease with a wide array of Sri Lankans. I am curious and excited

to see in what way my work on *Write to Reconcile* will change my own writing some years from now..

This year's anthology focuses on the post-war period. The stories and poems gathered here reflect various levels of optimism or pessimism about this period. While exploring the post-war situation was the goal of this anthology, I was very careful not to limit writers to this theme. I wanted each writer to be driven by their own literary passion. Further, I felt that giving them the maximum leeway might bring about some surprising interpretations of the theme. This has proved to be the case. One of the leitmotifs explored again and again in this anthology, by both local and diasporic writers, is homelessness – the loss of home, the return to a lost home, the search for home, and the surprising finding of home in a place least expected. I am fascinated by the fact that so many of the writers in this anthology explore this theme.

With this third anthology, I feel that the goal I set off to achieve in 2012 has now been reached. There is now a body of literature that brings together the various experiences of the war and the post-war period, from the point of view of a variety of Sri Lankans, both those living here, and those who have carried and dealt with the wounds of war in foreign countries. The only goal left for me is to compile a single anthology that includes selections from all three editions, and to publish this compilation in all three national languages.

One of the greatest pleasures of this project has been working with Amrita, Shiromi and Nayomi, of experiencing the country and its people together, with many laughs along the way. The bond between us has grown from facing and dealing with adversities together. I don't think any of us will ever forget the precarious sea journey back from Delft in a dangerously overcrowded boat, sitting on the roof, water-soaked towels draped over our heads for protection from the blazing sun; nor the time the bus got stuck in sand in the Vanni and all the participants and staff pushed until its wheels came loose and heaved the bus forward. *Write to Reconcile* would not have been possible without Amrita and Shiromi undertaking the painstaking administrative details that made the residential workshops a success, not to mention the book launches, the printing of the anthologies, the promotion and publicity, and the call for applications. This is the second time Nayomi has served as workshop facilitator. Her warmth

and openness towards the participants has contributed a lot to helping them access their feelings and experiences, confident they won't be judged negatively.

The American Centre has been our steady supporter through all three years of the programme and we are very grateful for their goodwill and backing of this project. Dr. Jehan Perera and The National Peace Council also worked with us from the beginning, giving *Write to Reconcile* a home in their wonderful NGO. They enthusiastically promoted our project and supported our efforts through, not just administrative help, but also by putting us in contact with some inspiring human rights activists and speakers, and by allowing us to use their staff as interpreters.

I have left it up to each writer to decide if they want to have a glossary, so some pieces do, some don't. I hope you enjoy this anthology and are moved and changed by the stories you find within these pages.

### ***Shyam Selvadurai***

*Shyam Selvadurai is the author of the bestselling Funny Boy, Cinnamon Gardens, Swimming in the Monsoon Sea and The Hungry Ghosts. He is also the editor of two anthologies, Story-Wallah: A Celebration of South Asian Fiction and Many Roads Through Paradise, An Anthology of Sri Lankan Literature. His work is published internationally and has been translated into 9 languages. He divides his time between Sri Lanka and Canada, where he teaches creative writing at the University of Toronto and the University of Guelph. He is also the Curator of the Fairway Galle Literary Festival.*

## ***A Nation is Defined by the Stories it Chooses to Tell***

Nayomi Munaweera

As a writer, I have been a part of various literary festivals, writing programs and student workshops over the years. Of all these, *Write to Reconcile* remains closest to my heart for the reasons that it allows me access to a tremendous array of aspiring young Sri Lankan writers, and that it keeps me close to the stories generated in the country of my birth. A nation knows itself through the stories it generates and, in this way, *Write to Reconcile* is an important piece of the post-war Sri Lankan narrative.

In 2016, we conducted the *Write to Reconcile* residential workshop in Anuradhapura, a location chosen for its relative proximity to the former battle zones in the North as well as Sinhala border villages. On the day the workshop started, Shyam Selvadurai, Amrita Pieris, Shiromi Pieris and I carefully set up our classroom and awaited the arrival of our students. When they came, I was happy to discover the diversity of experience they brought with them. There were two young boys from Richmond College, my father's alma mater, who reminded me of my father as he would have been decades before I was born. There were three talented students from the North, two of whom were old enough to have lived through warfare. There was a law student from Peradeniya whose parents had been army officials; a female Muslim journalist who had experienced anti-Muslim hatred in Colombo. There were many more, each of them with an important story to tell. Together they formed a rich tapestry of experience.

For the next week, the students worked extremely hard. They listened as Shyam shared his deep insights into the making of literature. They flexed their own creative muscles in the crafting of poems, scenes and vignettes. They talked to each other, worked on group stories, and presented their work to the class. More than anything else, they wrote, learning to perfect the sentence, the paragraph and then the story through numerous edits.

During the week, we took two field trips. The first was to the former battle zones of the North. We visited a school and a church where we met Tamil survivors. At the school, I joined a group of students under a tree as a man sitting in a chair shared his story. The left side of his body had been paralysed due to shrapnel lodged in his head. The doctor had said it would be too dangerous to remove it, he told us. He pulled his sarong up his thigh to show us the shrapnel wounds along his leg. It was only when we asked what had happened to his family that he revealed the fact that his three children had all been killed. He had been in a hospital recovering from a previous attack, when the hospital was bombed. He had survived this attack but his son who was sitting next to his bed had not.

At the second location, a giant church with no pews, sand underfoot, we sat at the altar and listened as a man described hiding his children in an underground room when the Tigers or the army came by. They dug a hole in the house and, when they knew the Tigers were looking for children to conscript, they put the children down into this space. They closed the trapdoor, put a mat down and served the Tigers a meal on top of it. Sometimes it would be hours before the Tigers left and they could let the children out of the tiny, dark space.

I had written a novel about this war but listening to those who had lived through it showed me that I didn't have the first clue about how much people had suffered. That evening, in my journal I wrote in big letters, "What happened here is so much worse than anyone knows."

On our second field trip, we visited a Sinhala border village. I sat with a group of students on the veranda of a house with a host of village women and their various children. They served us juice and biscuits, and one woman with a child between her knees told us of the Tiger bus bombing that had killed eighty-six fellow villagers. The village is remote and there is only one daily bus. On that day, many of their friends and loved ones had caught the bus to attend the funeral of a villager some miles away. From their houses, they heard the terrible sound of the bombing. They ran to the site, but they couldn't get close because the army and the Tigers had started a gun battle. They waited helplessly listening as their wounded loved ones screamed in agony and died in a paddy field next to the road.

Next, we went to a Buddhist temple. As we sat in a circle with our notebooks, one of the Buddhist monks began to speak. He prefaced his talk saying, “People see our robes and think we hate Tamil and Muslim people. But we have been working for peace, providing a safe place for all the people in this region.” His words made me realise that since the rise of the BBS, I too had grown suspicious of the religion I had been born into. The robes had indeed come to represent to me racial inequality and violence. It was startling to have my own assumptions questioned and to realise that there were many groups working hard to heal the rifts among us.

After these two trips, we returned to the classroom and were visited by human rights activists. We learned of the thousands of disappeared, and the unending and heart-breaking search by their families; of women who went out to protest and call for accountability for those taken in white vans. A female human rights activist came to tell us what happened to the bodies of women in the course of the war. Personally, her stories were the hardest for me to listen to.

We were all, students and teachers, coming to a sense of how much human suffering had occurred in the war years. It was both overwhelming and enlightening to hear these many different voices.

As teachers, we watched the students attempt to assimilate what they had seen and heard. Sometimes, this took place on a personal level. Some students had parents who were in the Army; they wondered if their parents had been aware of these atrocities. Others had been taught to view the Tigers as freedom fighters and were now learning of their atrocities against their own people. Some students had never been close to a person of another ethnicity before and now they were sharing their life stories with each other in the classroom, over meals, and in their shared rooms. Long-held assumptions about other communities were being questioned and dispelled.

As mentors, we watched as the students struggled to express these experiences in words; we watched as their minds and hearts expanded to fit new ideas, new ways of seeing the world. Most importantly, we watched their writing improve day by day and we grew extremely proud of each one of them. I know I am not alone when I say that what I saw and heard during *Write*

*to Reconcile* will stay with me over a lifetime, and will continue to colour the literature that I create.

When the workshop ended, we said our sad goodbyes and returned to our separate lives. We were no longer together but we came together online to share our stories on the online forum. This is when the real work of writing happened. Each student delivered a story and the others in their cohort would write long commentaries on each piece, which the writer would then incorporate in their rewrites. Finally Shyam and I offered our own editorial commentary on each piece. In this way, the work was sharpened and polished over and over again. Every poem and story in this anthology is the result of much individual and collective effort.

As a writer and a mentor, it has been a tremendous honour for me to watch these stories being born, and to help midwife them into their present state. Sri Lanka has suffered a great deal, as these stories display. The struggles our people endured are dark and deep-seated. The war years left their mark on every Sri Lankan in some way or the other. The telling and sharing of these tales is one way in which our nation comes to learn the truth, comes to honour the experience and hopefully comes to learn from its mistakes.

In closing, I want to thank Shyam Selvadurai for his tireless work on this book. It is rare in life to meet someone so generous with his time and attention. For me, it has been the honour of a lifetime to meet one of my literary heroes, and to become his friend. Shyam, the students and I are forever in your debt for your passion in furthering the cause of Sri Lankan literature.

Then too, *Write to Reconcile* would not have happened without the tireless energy and enthusiasm of that marvellous sister-in-law-team, Amrita Pieris and Shiromi Pieris.

Dear students, I hope that each of you keeps writing in whatever capacity you can. Your stories matter, they are important to us, and we are waiting to see what you do with this most powerful weapon – the written word.

Finally, dear reader, the anthology you are about to read contains the diverse voices of Sri Lanka. It tells tales of sorrow, war, migration, survival, loss, joy and love. We hope the experience of reading this work is useful, enlightening and enjoyable to you. We are honoured to bring it to you.

*Nayomi Munaweera's debut novel, **Island of a Thousand Mirrors** was long-listed for the Man Asia Literary Prize and the Dublin IMPAC Prize. It was short-listed for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and the Northern California Book Prize. It won the Commonwealth Regional Prize for Asia. Munaweera's second novel, **What Lies Between Us**, was hailed as one of the most exciting literary releases of 2016 from venues ranging from Buzzfeed to Elle magazine. Both novels have been widely translated. Her non-fiction and short fiction are also published in a variety of venues. [www.nayomimunaweera.com](http://www.nayomimunaweera.com).*

## *Our House in Navatkuli*

Krishanth Manokaran

### 1.

As Balan drove, the morning light began to slip through the rows of Palmyras, casting long, striped shadows along the A9. A flock of crows flew across his side-view mirror past a patch of clouds still untouched by the light. In the middle of the road, he spotted a pair of chitals foraging the cracked cement. He pressed on the brakes. The chitals looked up. They watched him, fixed and unblinking, as if waiting for the white Morris Minor to pounce. One of them lowered its head and continued searching while the other walked off languidly through a curtain of wild grass. He flicked his headlights on. A beam of light hit the body of the chital and it scrambled back behind the first.

Down the road, he could see a Sri Lankan flag crest the trees. It fluttered weakly on an iron pole, the shape of the yellow lion made lurid by the glowing light. Its clutched sword vanished within the flag's folds. He was close to Elephant Pass, he thought to himself, close to their final checkpoint.

A weathered sign greeted him as the Minor cleared the trees. *Checkpoint to the Left*, it read in Sinhala, and again below in Tamil. A large canvas tent sat in the middle distance. The A9 stretched straight ahead, past the tent, and cut through the shimmering blue of the Jaffna lagoon. Almost home, he thought.

His granddaughter was sleeping in the passenger's seat. Her head rested on the window, her arms were clasped around her drawn knees. Her yellow Punjabi dress was studded with sequins and reflected light like the lagoon.

He wondered if she still remembered the lagoon, or how she used to call out to her father as he slid further into its still water. When she was younger, she would pound on Balan's chest and demand he take her back to her Appa who was eternally casting his fishing net, in her mind.

Now that she was ten and no longer wished to be carried around by him, he felt silly asking if she remembered those moments along the lagoon. He brushed her shoulder.

“Chelvi ma, wake up,” he said, as he stopped the car.

She mumbled in her sleep and turned toward the door with her back to him. Her hands released her legs and they dangled off the seat. He opened the glove box and took out his papers. He glanced quickly at himself in the rearview mirror, at his balding, white hair.

By the green canvas tent was a low Bo tree. White pieces of cloth were tied along its sprawled branches, and under the canopy was a statue of the Buddha, dressed in an orange robe, watching him with half-closed eyes. Balan felt nervous. He did not remember such a shrine or tree being here, and he wondered if it too had migrated with the tent. Since the ceasefire was called six months ago, these shrines had felt like more of a reminder of the war than symbols for peace. This had been his fourth checkpoint stop, and each time a shrine like this was not too far away.

The front flaps of the canvas tent were parted like a curtain, and inside were a desk and cabinet at either end. The desk on the left was empty but the one to his right was occupied by a soldier in a camouflaged uniform and red beret. A rifle was strapped around the chair behind him. He waved at Balan to approach.

Balan smiled meekly and handed him the papers. A deed to a house. Land ownership documents. Two government health papers. One teacher’s certificate. The soldier glanced through them, and spoke without looking up.

“Where are you coming from?” he asked.

“Kandy,” Balan replied.

“Where are you going?”

“Navatkuli.”

“Why?”

“To visit family.”

The soldier seemed to be satisfied by his answers, for he leaned back on his chair and removed his beret to wipe off the sweat that ran down his forehead. He looked like a young boy, eighteen or so, matchstick-thin and darkened to the color of wet mud.

Another man entered the tent, and the young soldier immediately stood up and saluted. The other, older officer, walked up to them both and glanced briefly at Balan. He was tall with a muscular physique and face that revealed no emotion, like a walking effigy. He started to speak in Sinhala. The young soldier put back his beret and replied quickly. Balan gazed down at the shaded dirt, not wanting to draw attention to himself. He did not understand Sinhala, and he hoped his passiveness would relay the same. Their voices reached his ears in rhythm: one was slow and composed, while the other was fast and unsteady. Without looking up, he knew the latter was the boy's.

Soon after their conversation, the officer left the tent, and the young soldier sank into his chair. He seemed afraid. He finally glanced up at Balan as if he did not know who he was.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

Balan paused. He did not know if it was a trick.

“Navatkuli.”

The soldier gathered his papers on the desk and handed them back to him. He asked Balan to fill out a short form and let him go without another word.

The Minor stopped at the tarnished skyblue gates. It settled to a hum as Balan got out of the car and pushed the gates open. Drawing a smooth arc on the sand as it swung back, the gate revealed a small yellow-walled house, a dilapidated verandah, withered shrubs of *Nithyakalyanis* and *Ixora*, and a mango tree with a dog sleeping under its shadow.

He walked around to the passenger's seat and opened the door. His granddaughter, now awake, was scribbling on a notebook resting on her lap.

“Chelvi ma, come, we're home.”

“Thatha, look!” she exclaimed, showing him her picture. Wavy grounds, crows drawn as stretched M’s, a messy forest, and a road snaking up the page.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“You don’t know?” she replied, slightly dejected.

“Oh ma, I don’t have my glasses, I can’t see it.”

“No, I won’t tell you then!” she retorted. “Amma and Appa would know what this is! They would know!” She clambered off her seat and ran through the opened gates. Closing the door and following slowly behind her, a film of water glazed his eyes.

Their mongrel, Lucky, was the first to welcome them. It poked its head up and barked as Balan and Chelvi stepped on to the veranda. It smelled Balan’s feet and gave his toes a gentle lick before drifting back under the shade of the mango tree to resume its slumber. Chelvi sat on the old rattan chaise as Balan searched for the key. The padlock around the front door was cased in dust, and he smiled as he told Chelvi this.

“Look ma, how much dust has surrounded the lock...like an extra covering, ena?”

Chelvi was silent, lips pouted, she turned her face the other way. He found the key and the lock clacked open, like his crepitated joints.

Chelvi stayed outside on the rattan chaise, in silent protest, for what cause he could not determine. Was she still angry with him for the drawing? Did she not want to come back home? It had been two years since their last visit and, with the ceasefire, he felt the time to return was right. Was he wrong? A fear started to well up in him that coming back had been a mistake. He opened all the windows and doors to let the air in and walked back to the veranda.

“Chelvi ma, come inside, look, your books are inside,” he said.

She remained silent, her back turned to him.

“I’m sorry ma, your drawing is very nice, you have to show it to me when you’re done, ena. Then I can see it and put it on the wall.”

Her shoulders relaxed and she turned back around to face him.

“In a frame?”

He smiled. “Yes ma, we can buy a nice frame in Chavakachcheri and put it wherever you like.”

The gate rattled, and a man and woman appeared through the opening.

“Muthu maama, Vavy maami!” Chelvi called, running out to greet her uncle and aunt.

Muthu picked her up by her armpits and swung her around a few times in the air. She spun with laughter as he repeated her name.

“Tamilchelvi! Tamilchelvi! Tamilchelvi!”

He landed her back softly onto the sand and flexed his wrists.

“You are getting heavy, Chelvima. What has your Thatha been feeding you?”

“Idiyappam and sothi...” she sighed.

Muthu laughed and ruffled her hair.

“How long it’s been...without you,” his voice cracked: “Go say hi to Vavy maami.”

Chelvi ran over to the woman who was latching the gate, a bag full of vegetables around her shoulder.

Muthu approached Balan, who was on the veranda, watching him sternly. He smiled with his stained red teeth, a piece of paan pressed against his cheek. At forty-four, his skin was still taut, a shade of dark mahogany. His abdominals were shaped like husked maize. Stepping up onto the veranda, he adjusted the ends of his checkered sarong and folded it above his knees.

“Balan maama, how was the drive? No trouble at the checkpoint?” he asked, leaning on the veranda ledge.

“Dai, where have you been? Look at the state of this house. I told you to hire cleaners,” Balan snapped, angrily.

“Maama, varangal. Coming in a few hours from Kondavil. They’ll have the house ready in time for lunch. It’s—” Muthu looked at his

watch, “eight. They’ll be here by ten, finish by eleven in time for the rest of Navatkuli to come in the afternoon.”

“Ceri,” Balan mumbled. He was impressed that his nephew had planned ahead. Still, as he walked back inside he sneered, “Then hit the bottle in the afternoon, ena?”

“Ena, maama...I stopped,” Muthu mumbled, looking down at his crossed feet.

“Dai, wake me up at ten. Don’t forget,” Balan warned. Lucky sauntered up behind him onto the veranda, and rested idly in a corner.

Inside his house, Balan adjusted the chairs, straightened the table, and stacked his old teaching books. Suddenly, his gaze blurred. He was back home. But it didn’t feel like home. He wiped his eyes and continued to stack his books. It would never feel like home again, he decided.

He could hear Vavy laugh from the kitchen. She was probably preparing lunch. It was past eight, and through the barred window, light formed grids across the linoleum floor. He walked through the hall to his bedroom and, as he turned to close the door, he caught a glimpse of three framed photos hanging on a solitary wall. Each adorned with flowers. Withered, hanging by a thread. The first was of his wife in a purple sari. Next, his daughter-in-law in a maroon sari. The last, his son in a crisp white shirt.

## 2.

After her nap on the rattan chaise, Chelvi decided to check in on Vavy. As she ran around to the backyard, she saw the old well in the corner with the raised cement walls and metal pail sitting in a nest of rope. The chicken pen was vacant; its door removed, revealing the countless droppings. She went inside to the kitchen. Vavy was on the floor, sitting on a bed of newspapers chopping chilli peppers. She didn’t notice Chelvi, and sensing this, Chelvi hid behind a wall next to the kitchen. Giggling, she peeked inside at the clay stove burning; the pots in full bubble. Garlic and ginger dangled along the wooden lintel. Soot stuck to the walls like rigid shadows. The wooden almirah beside the stove

loomed over Vavy. Its doors were ajar and Chelvi wondered if she could fit inside a compartment. Vavy got up and walked toward the sink and began to wash her hands.

“If only I had someone to help me with this work...then I can see how my special hen is doing,” she said, turning off the tap.

She sat back down and began to peel the potatoes.

“I hope she laid another gold egg today...”

“Gold egg!” Chelvi blurted. She came out of hiding and stood in front of Vavy. “Where Vavy maami?” she asked.

“Behind you,” Vavy smiled.

Chelvi turned around, and Vavy playfully smacked her.

“Maami!” Chelvi exclaimed, both hands clutching her rear.

Vavy laughed, and drew Chelvi in for a hug and dry kiss on both cheeks. “Enda Cheelam,” Vavy crooned, pinching her cheeks. “That’s what happens to girls who hide from their maami.”

“I wasn’t...” Chelvi mumbled.

“Two years away from me and you’ve picked up some bad habits, enadi!”

“Enadi! Enadi!” Chelvi laughed, pressing her hands on Vavy’s cheeks.

Vavy pulled her in and hugged her again. Chelvi wriggled loose and sat beside her.

“Ceri ma, good, sit, now we can talk. How is Kandy?”

“Ok,” Chelvi replied.

“And studies? Was thatha your maths teacher?”

“No, he teaches class five,” Chelvi answered. “I’m in class one.”

“Ceri ceri, study well, ma, if this ceasefire brings an end to the war, you have to study and help us in Navatkuli, ena?”

She tossed the peeled potatoes and chilli peppers into a large clay pot beside her. She asked to be helped up and Chelvi grabbed her arm. Her skin was damp, its wrinkled folds dangling around Chelvi's small hands.

"What's the food for, maami?" Chelvi asked.

"For you and your thatha, ma," Vavy replied, taking the pot to the stove. "Everyone in Navatkuli will be coming soon."

"Why?"

"To see you and your thatha."

As the pot came to a simmer, she closed the lid.

"Why don't you go play? I'll need your help soon to grate the coconuts... But first promise me you won't stray far from the house," she said, holding out her palm. Chelvi placed her hand over it and nodded. "I promise."

Chelvi decided to look for her Thatha instead. She checked the living room, then opened the door to his bedroom and found him asleep cloaked in a thin, white linen sheet. She crept up to the edge of the bed and watched his stomach rise and fall slowly, and his mouth form an audible sigh. Satisfied, she eased the door closed and walked out to the veranda.

A breeze was caught between the leaves of the mango tree, shifting the shadows below. She could see the Minor between the lower slits of the skyblue gate. Her notebook! She ran to the gate, pushed it ajar and, when she reached the car, opened the driver's door. It was on the passenger's seat. Relieved, she clambered up onto the driver's seat, and knelt on the leather, pretending to be the captain of her ship: the T.C. Minor. She usually commandeered the ship when her Thatha left her in the car while he ran errands.

It was nice to be back at the helm. She rolled down the window and called out, "One minute to departure!" Lucky appeared by the gate and wagged his tail in reply. Rolling up the window, she checked on the wheel. Locked. The window. Clean. The water. Still. The fuel. F. ellaam ceri. All systems go.

She had just eased her ship into the water, when she saw women appear in the rearview mirror. They wore plain saris and their hair was wreathed in

cloth. They carried long rakes. Pirates! Chelvi quickly abandoned ship with her notebook in hand and ran back into the safety of her home.

### 3.

At ten o'clock, Vavy went back home and woke Muthu from his nap. He returned groggily to the house, recovering from a terrible dream. In it, Vavy had told him that the ceasefire had ended, that the fight between the Tigers and the Army was about to recommence and, going outside, he had seen shells in the air above them, suspended and stoic as clouds, waiting to fall. He awoke just as the first one landed.

Around the yard, the cleaners were busily sweeping with metal rakes, and collecting the dried leaves that had fallen from the shrubs and mango tree. He noticed that each of them was old enough to be a grandmother. Their skin was tanned and their saris starched. Their anklets rattled with each step. Parking his sandals by the veranda, he saw that the floor was still wet from a recent mopping.

Inside, the house smelled of sambrani smoke. The prayer door had already been opened and he could hear the radio playing Tevarams from within. Just in time for the villagers, he thought, walking toward the closed bedroom door.

"Balan maama," Muthu called, knocking on the door. He eased it open and saw that the bed was empty, sheets and pillow splayed to one side. He went to see Vavy in the kitchen, and Chelvi, who was grating a coconut on a metal spur.

"Maama enga?" he asked.

"Thatha went to take a bath," Chelvi replied, wiping the beads of sweat dotting her forehead. Vavy handed him a cup of tea.

"Why are you making her grate the coconut, di?" Muthu asked.

"Because she has to learn, enama?" Vavy smiled, looking at Chelvi.

"Maama, I have to learn!" Chelvi answered, showing him the flakes of white that had landed in the bowl below.

Muthu laughed and ruffled her hair as he went out to the backyard. He couldn't see past the raised parapet surrounding the well, but he could hear the flat metallic sound of the pail being dropped into water. Then shortly after, he saw a translucent stream flowing out along the small culvert. He wondered if, at Balan's age, he would be able to pull up a bucket of water so easily.

When the cleaners were done, they waited with their rakes by the gate as Muthu inspected their work. The sand was perfectly smooth, save for the workers and Muthu's footprints. Lucky had been shooed away past the house's perimeter by the cleaners. Muthu checked the veranda, the living room with the floors mopped, walls washed, and chairs cleaned.

He paid them each fifty rupees and they slipped it into their sari blouses. He went back inside the house and saw Vavy looking at the framed photos hanging on the wall. The malai of flowers around each framed photo had shriveled to grey.

"Maama hasn't said a word about them..." she said. "I feel afraid to ask."

"Ask what?"

"If I could replace the malai."

Muthu curled his mouth in reply.

"I still remember when I saw them last." She paused. "I went to the temple earlier than usual that day, before sunrise, I think, to help prepare for the puja and I saw Krishnan and Sugi. They were seated in prayer, with their legs crossed and Chelvi ran and sat in each of their laps. I'll never forget that image. I still remember thinking...they looked so peaceful I thought I shouldn't disturb them. When I came back to see them, they had already left. I only heard later that afternoon what had happened..." She fell silent. Muthu remembered too. Krishnan had taken his motorbike to drive Sugi to the market and gunfire had broken out on the A9. Who fired first they didn't know. The army blamed the boys. The boys blamed the army. What solace did that give to a father? The pain Balan must have gone through, he thought. His granddaughter and this house are a reminder of what he has lost. Vavy was still, gazing at the photos. Muthu watched her, not knowing what to say. The silence between them grew.

## 4.

Vavy sat on her haunches, grinding black peppercorns in a small mortar and pestle. When she was done, she added a dollop to each curry.

From the yard, Muthu, who was taking chairs out to the yard in preparation for the villagers' impending arrival, shouted, "Everything ready, di?"

"Om," Vavy replied, then called everyone to the kitchen for lunch.

Balan, after his quick shower, was in the prayer room getting ready. Chelvi remained in Balan's room, resting on his bed, scribbling in her notebook.

Vavy re-checked the chatti pots that were covered with old newspaper sheets: the bright yellow parippu curry, the deep-green kerai, kilanku mixed with chilies. In the largest pot, wisps of steam curled into the air as she stirred the newly cooked rice.

She washed the banana leaves and spread a leaf each over the four plates and returned to clean out the mortar and pestle. Barks sounded from the yard and a shout for Balan echoed soon after. Vavy grimaced at the thought of the food getting cold, and walked out to the living room. Balan stood behind the barred window watching the gate open. He was wearing a white shirt and verti, and, from behind, his white hair was neatly combed around his balding crown. He turned to her, and she saw that his forehead was smeared with Vibhuti.

"Where's Chelvi?" he asked.

"In your room."

He nodded and walked out to the veranda. Vavy followed behind him, and soon realised the cause of his worried tone. Two army officials in uniform were approaching the verandah. Lucky sniffed at their black military boots and let out a low growl. Muthu, who walked behind the officers, afraid that it might anger them, kicked the dog away. The officers stopped short of the veranda, looked at the house, then at Balan.

“I am looking for Balan Eliyathamby,” said a soldier in broken Tamil. He looked young, eighteen or so, thought Vavy. The other officer was tall and muscular, and made her more worried.

“Yes?” asked Balan.

“We are from the Checkpoint... we need to take you back for questioning.”

“Questioning? I already spoke with you,” Balan said, looking at the young soldier. The soldier averted his gaze.

“The form you filled this morning is missing some information,” the other officer replied, sternly. “We will need to take you back for questioning.”

Vavy glanced at Muthu, who looked on nervously from under the mango tree.

“It will not take long. We will arrange an auto afterward,” the officer continued.

Balan stepped off the veranda and put on his slippers.

“Muthu thambi, get my bag.”

“Ceri, maama,” Muthu replied, and strode into the house. As he brushed past Vavy, she briefly met his gaze.

“Have lunch first, maama,” she said to Balan.

“Ila ma, I’ll take care of this and eat after.”

The soldiers glanced around the house as they spoke. Their hands were behind their back as they waited silently; their black boots planted in the sand.

Muthu returned with a jute bag and handed it to Balan.

“Look after Chelvi. Make sure she eats.”

They walked back together toward the skyblue gate – the officers in front with Balan, Muthu following. He watched them get into a white van that was parked behind the Minor. As the van circled around and drove off, Muthu closed the gate.

When Vavy opened the bedroom door, Chelvi sat on the edge of the bed, scribbling away in her notebook. Vavy came up and sat beside her.

“Time for lunch, ma.”

“One minute, maami...”

She seemed to draw in a finishing touch, then bridged the notebook across both their laps. It was a single page and Vavy smiled at the details. Wavy grounds, crows drawn as stretched M’s, a messy forest, and a road snaking up the page to a house with a tree, a dog, and six matchstick figures. Clumps of flowers were drawn around the house.

“It’s our house!” said Chelvi. “Our house in Navatkuli. See, there’s the forest, the road to our house, the mango tree, the flower bushes, Lucky, me, you, Muthu maama, and Thatha, and Amma and Appa!”

The people were drawn to one side of the page, the women with triangle bottoms, the men with square. She noticed that two of the figures were drawn above the four on the ground, as if they were floating in the air.

“Who’s this?”

“Appa and Amma...”

Vavy pursed her lips. Her gaze blurred and she turned away to wipe her eyes.

“It’s beautiful, ma. Very nice.”

“Where’s Thatha? I want to show it to him also!”

Vavy sighed and took Chelvi’s hand.

“He’ll be back soon, ma. Come, it’s time for lunch.”

*Krishanth Manokaran was born and raised in Toronto, Canada, and has visited Sri Lanka frequently to see his family in Navatkuli. His trips have always inspired him to write and have strengthened his ties with Jaffna. He hopes to explore more of Sri Lanka in the future. He is currently pursuing a Masters in Science.*

## *Lunugama*

Sakunthala Wijesinghe

Lunugama is a sluggish, damp village, deep in the hill country of Bandarawela. The centre comprises of only two shops: a Multi Store, with a few faded nightdresses strung across the window and a row of glaringly bright flip flops scattered across the porch. Immediately next to it is a small mudalali's hut, predominantly selling shampoo packets in long columns of rectangular foil embossed with the printed face of an Indian woman with a glossy black mane. A little way down from these two shops, the farmers of the village display their produce on straw mats: bunches of turnips, onions and potatoes, all the same dusty, earthy brown. It is a non-descript village, but this is where Dakshitha's family hailed from. And it was here that the Department of Social Services built a detention centre to house and torture hundreds of young men, during the 1971 JVP uprising.

The detention centre was set back away from the main road, down a narrow lane. It was painted green, but not a green that blended well with the dense emerald of its surroundings. Instead, it was an almost neon-lime colour, which made the red blood stains stand out. Dakshitha was only twelve years old then. The year was 2004 and it was his second visit to Sri Lanka, eight years after his parents had first brought him. It was an unusually warm day for the hill country, and the humidity felt particularly oppressive. On their way down to the village to see what sweets the shopkeeper had to offer, Dakshitha and his cousin Gayani saw that the stillness of the village below had been disturbed, a crowd gathered at the detention centre. Dakshitha's initial caution was dismissed by Gayani.

"Rubbish. Let's go see. I always wondered what was in that house." She looked at him expectantly.

"Er, I'm pretty hungry." He yawned, trying to appear casual. "Let's just go get the chocolate and return? They'll probably be wondering where we are."

“Don’t be stupid, we can buy the sweets any time. Anyway, it’s three – the parents will all be having their post-rice-and-curry nap. It’ll be at least an hour before they’re awake. Don’t you want to see what’s going on?”

Dakshitha knew that if he protested anymore he would lose the façade of cool he had tried so hard to create since first meeting his older cousin in Colombo a week ago.

“Yeah, okay. Let’s go.”

She grabbed his hand and he felt his palm begin to get clammy inside hers. He couldn’t tell if this was due to the fear of being led into the shadowy unknown, or because he was acutely aware of the fact that they were now holding hands. At fourteen, Gayani was a little taller than him, and unusually broad shouldered for a Sri Lankan. Her bronze skin was deeper in tone than his, and silver anklets gleamed above her black Bata flip flops. Her frizzy hair had been tied into a high bun and her jeans were a little too wide at the bottom to be considered fashionable, yet they were worn with such confidence it didn’t seem to matter. On her right wrist was a collection of *pirith noola* from the temple, their original orange and white now faded into a stringy grey mass. She had told him she liked collecting them, that they made her feel proud of her religion. In contrast, Dakshitha hated being dragged to the temple back home in England, but he pretended to be interested when she talked about her friends from Dhamma class.

In the week that had passed since he had met her, Dakshitha had badly wanted to impress Gayani with stories of his life in England. He didn’t remember much of their meeting as young children, that first time that he had visited, but he found that his attachment to her had grown suddenly over the past few days, as if he had always known her. Back in England, because his parents often remarked on how well she was doing at school, he had expected to meet a quiet, bookish girl whom he’d have nothing in common with. He was surprised by her confidence, the way she could actually engage in political conversations with her parents, honed from experience as captain of the debating club. He both admired her, and felt compelled to prove himself in front of her, never wanting to be beaten by a girl. To this end, he boasted of trips to London, going to gigs with his friends, all the different kinds of food they had at home, how he had seen films that hadn’t even come out yet in Colombo. She had seemed interested at first, but then grew defensive when he belittled life in Sri Lanka.

One evening while she was teaching him how to play carom in the dining room, he had remarked how slow life seemed in Sri Lanka, and that he was glad he didn't live here. "Well, you don't have beaches like ours," she had snapped, adding, "My friend Sevanthi went to see her cousins in Southampton once, and said that the English people were really rude. I could never live *there*, I would never be able to stand the cold."

Still, he sensed that she was enchanted by all the things she had heard about England: he noticed the excitement in her eyes when her mother mentioned offhand in the car that they might visit Dakshitha and his family sometime in the future. As he watched her now, striding confidently in front of him, he couldn't deny that he was enthused about the prospect of her visiting, too.

They were now on the narrow lane, approaching the detention centre. The mellow gold light of the afternoon streamed through the trees, lighting up patches of the dusty brick-red ground. The chatter from the main street could no longer be heard, and the air felt completely still. The small house looked like any other building in the village: encircling it was a white veranda and its terracotta roof was high and pointed. Gayani had let go of Dakshitha's hand and was walking towards the sign in Sinhala on the wall, when she froze.

"What does it say?"

She didn't answer. Then Dakshitha saw it: a smear of red running across the bottom of the wall, fading to an earthy maroon. Presumably a police officer had missed this in his hurried attempt to clean up the crime scene. His heart tightened, and he knew that he didn't need to go closer to verify what it was.

"I think we should go, malli."

They sprinted back up the lane and headed straight to the family home. On their return, Gayani asked her father, Ranjith Uncle, what had happened that afternoon.

He had recently become a councillor for the district and appeared to take a strong interest in the local people. He had failed in his first three attempts at getting elected, but he had been adamant that he was the best person to represent his hometown, despite only making the journey up from Colombo in his jeep once a month.

“Ah, these are just affairs of the villagers,” he said, a wide statesman-like smile on his face. Yet his narrow, wary eyes seemed to belie his cheerfulness. “We do not get involved.”

He waved the children away and picked up his copy of *The Island*.

“But Thathi!” Gayani protested. “I think something really bad might have happened.”

“Do not go prying into other people’s business,” he replied from behind his newspaper. “Anyway, what were you all even doing down there? And in that vest top? I have told you so many times now that you need to be covered up when you go down to the village. Proper girls don’t go waltzing around in skimpy outfits. Go... put on a shawl or something.”

Gayani’s expression was a tight curl of frustration. “It’s boiling hot! Besides, this... isn’t about what I’m wearing. We saw something down there..”

“When you are older, you’ll see that some things are out of our hands,” he snapped, lowering his paper. After a struggle, that strange, insincere smile was back on his face again. “Just don’t think about all that too much.”



He didn’t know exactly what had happened that day, yet Dakshitha never wanted to accompany his family to Sri Lanka on holiday again. To his disappointment, Gayani didn’t end up coming to visit him in England. Still, he often spent his evenings chatting online with her after school. As the years passed, she spoke of how things were changing on the island, the devastation of the tsunami and how difficult it had become recently to go out anywhere in Sri Lanka as the war went on. Curfews had been imposed and checkpoints were multiplying. Her parents didn’t even let her walk the dog down the street now without the driver following her. At her school, tensions were rising between classmates as the shelling campaign in the North grew stronger and more civilians fell under the attack of the government’s indiscriminate attacks.

Dakshitha’s life seemed a world apart from what was going on in Sri Lanka

and he found it was remarkably easy to put these stories aside and carry on. At university, he decided not to join the Sri Lankan Society, which at the height of the civil war appeared to be disintegrating anyway into a clear Sinhala and Tamil divide. His mother told him that their local temple had recently been attacked by young Tamil men seeking retribution for the government's attacks in Kilinochchi. A group of his father's friends had formed a committee dedicated to defending Mahinda Rajapakse's name, and had apparently gone to Switzerland to protest the UN's human rights investigations in Sri Lanka.

Despite all this, the war seemed to altogether pass him by, and he only realised it was ending from a few heated Facebook debates. These events made Dakshitha slightly uneasy, if only because he ultimately felt guilty about his ignorance when quizzed by his English peers about what was going on. However, the questions soon disappeared, as coverage from the British media outlets stopped. He could go back to living a life untouched by the nuisance and second-hand guilt of knowing that he was somehow linked to the troubles of his parents' home country.

It was only when he received a call from Gayani to say she was getting married, that he realised he might eventually have to make a trip back there. The announcement came as a surprise to Dakshitha.

"Why marriage...now? You've got such a great job and you always seemed like you never wanted a husband to define who you are."

"Because, malli, I'm rotting in this house. You know Thathi won't let me move out until I get married. After the wedding, Asanga and I plan to move to Melbourne, and then I can get a more interesting job and see the rest of the world."

"But couldn't you just do that on your own? Apply for a masters, or something?"

She laughed. "Maybe at some point, but I also think marriage might not be so bad. You'll see when you meet Asanga."

He felt saddened as there was something unconvincing in her voice, some sense of resignation. He would be overstepping his mark if he questioned her any further, so he said no more.

The idea of Gayani moving even further away to Australia compelled him to buy the extortionate ticket to fly out with his parents in December. He regretted now not coming to see her more often and knew that, once she was married, it would be more difficult to stay in touch. But it was also true that Sri Lanka had more of an appeal now to him than it ever had before. He'd heard that it was safer to visit, that there were new restaurants all over Colombo and beach parties in the South that could rival those of Thailand. His home island was now rated one of the top tourist destinations in the world and his friends would frequently ask him for recommendations (never mind that he had only visited the country twice in his life). It felt good to be able to tell them in detail about the areas surrounding Lunugama, the hidden waterfalls and breath-taking views, and to seem like some kind of authority on the matter. Not only was the war now over, a new government had been elected, he had heard. Perhaps things had finally changed for the better.



A day after their arrival, he and his parents travelled up to Lunugama to meet Gayani's family, who had already been there for a few days. While the journey from Colombo was now marked by vast stretches of pristine motorway (built by the Chinese! his mother whispered in awe) that cut cleanly across the bright green vegetation, the roads up to the village were largely the same as they had been thirteen years ago: uneven, winding and sickness-inducing. The jeep jolted and swerved as they drove deeper into the hill country, each turn making him increasingly nauseated.

Lunugama hadn't changed. Once they reached the village, Dakshitha caught a quick glimpse of the shops and, for a moment, he remembered the green detention centre, before his nausea consumed him once again. Scrambling out of the jeep as soon as it halted next to the house, he found the nearest bush and heaved. The crisp and bitter scent of tea-leaves from the surrounding plantations seemed to settle his stomach a little. His mother gave him a chunk of lime to chew on. He washed his face at the tap behind the kitchen, from where the familiar yet still remarkable view of the hills could be seen. This green expanse

was broken only by occasional flecks of white: the Buddhist viharas that seemed to have multiplied considerably since Dakshitha had last stood here.

At dinner, the conversation among his cousins, aunts, and uncles meandered from who was invited to the wedding, to the new Sri Lankan government, to Prince Charles's visit to the island a few years ago, for a Commonwealth Summit. Dakshitha noticed that there was a sense of excitement not just about the upcoming wedding, but also due to a feeling that a new era had begun for the island. He could not help but notice the gleaming, expensive-looking watch on Ranjith Uncle's thick wrist, and the new rings encrusted with precious stones that were wedged onto his fingers. He had heard that his uncle had invested heavily in tourism after the war ended. He had also finally been elected MP for the district. To Dakshitha's dismay, on the journey up to the house, he and his parents had noticed his uncle's grinning face on posters plastered onto walls. Behind his uncle were backdrops of dazzling waterfalls and majestic elephants.

What really surprised him, though, was how much Gayani had changed. Of course, he had chatted to her online, but only now was he truly realising that she was a grown woman, her sharp nose seeming to finally fit her long face, her once-bushy eyebrows now elegantly shaped. That afternoon, when they arrived at the family home, he felt slightly awkward as she embraced him. Her spirit, her entire demeanour, had become alien to him. Watching her chatting animatedly with his parents, he saw that she had lost that familiar look of defiance in her face, the one which proclaimed that she was always ready to challenge whatever ignorant things people had to say. She seemed distracted by something; she was quieter and more resigned. He thought of this as he watched her now, huddled over her plate of food, ignoring the uncles' raucous jokes. He realised that there was a side to her that he would probably never know.

The conversation had now turned to Dakshitha's long absence from these family reunions, which had not gone unnoticed.

"Here, putha, so what do you think of Sri Lanka now?" Ranjith Uncle grinned, a string of *indiappa* dangling from his fat moustache. "You could even come and live here – better than living in London!"

Dakshitha shrugged amiably. "Yes, I suppose, maybe I could."

“That’s what I’m saying, we have no terrorist attacks here now unlike in Europe!” piped in Wimal Uncle.

“You know what I think: I think the British have actually got it all wrong when it comes to Muslims. They are too bloody tolerant! Better force them to accept the Western way of life and values!”

Dakshitha turned to look at Gayani, who suddenly rolled her eyes: The old Gayani back for an instant before she bent over her plate again.

“Actually,” he began, “I think, for all its shortcomings, Britain’s multiculturalist approach has actually worked out better compared to other European countries.”

“What nonsense!” Ranjith Uncle sneered. “Those buggers have it in their head that they can welcome all communities under one roof. That simply can’t work, there has to be one vision for the country and everyone must work towards that.”

“Can we not talk about something else?” Gayani’s mother, Auntie Gimla, interjected wearily. “I’m so fed up of all this political chat. It’s boring and pointless anyway.”

“You all can stay here and gossip about your saris and bridesmaids,” Ranjith Uncle said, as the servant came to take his plate away. “The men will move to the living room for a spot of whisky and continue our conversation. Dakshitha come, join us.”

The idea of prolonging this uncomfortable conversation was too much for Dakshitha, so he let out a deliberately long sigh. “Oh, I can’t Maama. I’m really exhausted. Still not feeling too great from the journey up here! Think I’d better get an early night.” He saw from the corner of his eye that Gayani was smirking at him.

“Ah? You can stay up for one drink! Come, come. We have so much to catch up on.”

“Ranjith, just let the boy go to sleep,” Auntie Gimla said. “We have plenty to do in the morning anyway, better he’s rested.”

Dakshitha hurriedly went to wash his hands at the kitchen sink, and Gayani followed.

“God, what the hell was all that about?” he muttered. “I knew they have some dodgy views, but it looks like they’ve got worse, not better, now that the war is over.”

She nodded slowly. “Yeah...they’re just old men though, with old ideas that will probably never change.”

“But still, I mean, the hypocrisy of it... I can’t begin to...” Dakshitha trailed off. “You could probably have articulated it much better than I did.”

“Believe me, I’ve tried. They won’t listen, so what’s the point?”

Dakshitha studied his cousin’s face. “Are you ... okay? How are you feeling about the wedding... and everything?”

Gayani let out a sigh. “Yes, I’m fine. Really. I mean, there’s all this pomp and circumstance that I really can’t be bothered with, but it’s just to make Ammi and Thathi happy. Soon, it’ll be over.”

“Don’t sound *too* excited, now!” he said, nudging her elbow.

“I *am* excited!” She scowled, then her face softened, “You probably wouldn’t understand it yet, but I really can’t wait to spend my life with Asanga.”

Dakshitha was aware of the slightly patronising tone her voice had taken.

“I really am tired, malli.” She smiled. “Goodnight.”

She gave him a light peck on the cheek, and he watched her walk quickly to her room.

Dakshitha took his suitcase from the hall, wondering how a person could have changed so much, and followed a servant to his room. It was the same one he had been allocated during his last visit. The bright moonlight hung low in the sky, enveloping one side of the room in a cold eeriness. Lying in bed and trying to fall asleep, he recalled memories of how fiercely Gayani used to stand up to her father. He lay staring at the ceiling and soon realised he was seeing details of the room as he had seen it as a child: the intricate carvings that crawled up the sides of the teak furniture had flowery patterns, delicate in the daytime, but now a dizzying mass of snakes gliding over one another. The knobs of the almirah, painted white with small red flowers in the centre, he was seeing now as piercing eyeballs, bloodshot and dilated like those of the

*yaka* that hung above the front door. High up in the breezy air of Bandarawela, the branches of the low hanging *araliya* tree thudded softly on the roof of the bungalow. In the direction of the town, dogs howled at each other in anxious conversation. He soon found himself thinking of the detention centre they had passed earlier today. His parents had said it was a detention centre, but as a child he hadn't realised what that had truly meant. He had innocently assumed it was school-related, perhaps somewhere naughty boys, who hadn't done their homework, had to stay as a punishment. He also remembered mentions of the LTTE, but why would they be down here in the hill country? Trying in vain to piece together these things, he gradually drifted into an uneasy and restless sleep.



After breakfast the next morning, the family packed into the jeep to visit the temple and school that Ranjith Uncle had been giving donations to. They took fruits, flowers, robes, pens and pencils with them. At the school, Ranjith Uncle pointed out the new extension, where they could see rows of children quietly scratching into their notebooks. Throughout their visit (multiple cups of tea, seemingly unlimited supplies of short eats) Ranjith Uncle was greeted with excitement by everyone: teachers, principal and even people he didn't know directly.

Gayani said quietly, "I knew some of these girls before – they couldn't go beyond grade 6 because there was no secondary school close by."

"Yeah, it's great," he whispered back.

She noticed the somewhat-unconvinced look on his face. After a moment, she gestured at her family.

"I know it's strange that they have to make a big show of it. But, at the end of the day, they're actually making a big difference to peoples' lives."

She was now squeezing Dakshitha's arm and he saw that her eyes were glistening. Strangely, he too found a sense of pride beginning to swell inside of

him. People were celebrating his own family, for the good they were doing for the community.

After the school, they visited the temple. As he got out of the jeep, Dakshitha noticed the low wall circling the stupa, featuring a row of identical, carved elephant heads lowered in submission, tusks curved up to the sky. By the entrance was a message engraved in gold Sinhala lettering. He stood squinting at it, trying to decipher the script using his inadequate knowledge of the language learnt begrudgingly at Saturday school in London.

“It says this stupa and wall was built thanks to the donations of Thathi and Wimal Maama,” Gayani explained.

Dakshitha squirmed. “A little ostentatious, no?”

“Yeah, for sure,” she said. “It’s what makes them happy though. What they think will bring them peace,” she added quickly, as if she was anticipating a cynical retort from Dakshitha.

Both uncles were now talking excitedly to the monk who had come out to greet them.

“Come over here, putha!” Ranjith Uncle cried, waving Dakshitha over.

“This is my nephew Dakshitha, Shrimathi’s son. Such a clever boy, went to university in London and now training to be a lawyer!” He beamed as Dakshitha approached them, and the monk smiled dutifully.

“He doesn’t want to be embarrassed by you, Maama!” Gayani, smiling, led Dakshitha away from the group, and they began to circle the stupa together. The air was laced with the cloying smell of incense and temple flowers.

“It’s going to be sad to leave,” Gayani said, looking out at the vast stretch of green, the outline of mountains faintly visible in the dusk. “I feel quite bad for going, now that Thathi and Ammi are getting older.”

“Yeah but, you know, it’s what everyone did back in the day too,” Dakshitha said. “You’ll be able to do so much more with your life, get a Masters even and see a completely different world. As long as Asanga doesn’t make you stay at home all day!”

She stopped walking, her expression clouded with irritation. “Sri Lankan men aren’t all patriarchal pigs, you know. Anyway, it’s not that. Sometimes I just feel there’s lots to be done here, it feels like things might really be starting to get better.”

Dakshitha took a breath. “I know what you mean. I think I might actually like to come, live and work here, at least for a couple of years.” His own words took him by surprise, yet he knew he really meant them.

“Yeah, Ammi and Thathi would love that!’ she laughed. “There’s lots of things you could do. But you’d better brush up on your pitiful Sinhala - folks here will never understand that ridiculous British accent!” Dakshitha laughed embarrassedly, as they headed towards the car where the family was waiting for them.



Back at the house, everyone flocked to the dinner table where a meal of fried rice and devilled chicken had been prepared for them. A quick check of his phone notified Dakshitha as he sat down of an email from Mark, a friend from school. It was titled simply: *Lunugama. Cheers for the recommendations mate – was doing some research and found this article: is this where your family is from? Not sure if this is a place to visit, eh?* Dakshitha clicked through to the article on the Human Rights Watch webpage.

*The Lunugama massacre: Twelve Years On and No Justice. In March 2004 an armed mob of Sinhala villagers stormed a rehabilitation centre where young LTTE suspects were being held and killed at least thirty five Tamil youths, as security forces stood by and even joined in. The youth were attacked with clubs and knives, and many were burned alive. Several were decapitated. Twelve escaped with serious injuries, but the majority were killed. Their ages ranged from 16-28. No police officers have been charged despite much political pressure on the local council over the past eleven years.*

He stopped reading and looked down at his empty plate. His expression must have reflected the nausea rising inside of him, because Gayani immediately noticed.

“Malli, why aren’t you eating?”

“What happened here... in 2004? The summer I was here last? What happened in that detention centre?”

He looked up around at his family who were staring at him. Ranjith Uncle’s face darkened.

“What do you mean, Putha? That was just some skirmish that broke out between some inmates and officers.”

“No - this, this article says that almost thirty young men died, some of them my age or even younger... and that nothing has been done about it?”

“What article? Let me see that.” Ranjith Uncle snatched the phone, then let out a scoff. “Human Rights Watch? These bloody western media people are always exaggerating things.”

“But you were there at the time... you were serving on the council, weren’t you? Why was nobody arrested? Why haven’t you done anything since?”

His uncle’s face was stoic, lethal. “These were LTTE boys. They had surely been involved in some kind of terrorist act before they got here. Yes, yes,” he continued firmly, “the village people naturally wanted to take revenge, and we couldn’t really do anything about it.”

“Putha,” his mother intervened nervously, “don’t disrespect your uncle. He was just doing what was best for the family and the villagers.”

Dakshitha’s eyes went back to Gayani. He saw that resignation had overcome her face, “Had... had you heard about this?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied quietly. “But what is to be done now? What good will it do to bring it all up again, now that the war is over?”

“How could you even - I don’t understand.” Dakshitha felt his voice trembling. “They need to be brought to justice, we can’t just leave this?”

Gayani looked at him wearily, as if she were speaking to a child that had just thrown a tantrum. “Malli, we’ve done so much for this village,” she said in a quiet voice. “Bringing all that trouble up now – it’s not going to help matters. Everyone is just so sick of the war, and it’s something you’ll never understand because you weren’t here. I know what happened was really terrible, and I’m upset about it too. But there’s some parts of history that we just need to let go of.”

Stunned at his cousin’s words, he rose from his chair and, while the rest of the family continued to stare after him, he walked away in a daze to his room, shutting the door behind him. He sat down shakily on the bed. How many other incidents had there been like this? How many other people had stopped caring? A sense of profound loneliness came over him. He lay back and closed his eyes. He could hear the sound of cutlery on plates and low conversation from the next room. In the distance, the temple bell rang solemnly, to mark the evening prayers.

*Sakunthala Wijesinghe was born in London. She studied History at university and has always been fascinated by the different ways in which people can view the past. This story was inspired by the real Bindunuwewa massacre that took place in 2000. Five people were charged for the crimes in 2003, but then acquitted in 2005. To this day, there have been no further convictions.*

## *Home*

Shenali Perera

Every time I hear the kookaburras laughing, I hear my grandmother. Appamma made the same raucous noise, her whole body shaking as if unable to contain her joy. Had she come with us to Australia, she would've loved the kookaburras. I can just see her, standing out there in the yard on a deepening summer evening, throwing their *oo-ah-hahahahaha* back into the vast, empty sky.

If you wake before sunrise, the Kimberley Detention Centre is eerily silent. During the day, there is always a baby wailing in the distance, while conversations pile on top of one another inside the overcrowded dongas in which detainees like us are housed. On summer afternoons, it is too hot to go outside. I sit by the window and gaze out at the other dongas that sit in neat rows, like matchbox houses, under the blistering sun. Beyond them rise the fences. Tall, grey, fishnet fences that separate our yard from the next yard and the next. Fences running in every direction, dividing the world outside into tiny squares. As the heat thickens, our voices grow slower, stickier, and I think about running outside – shouting and flailing my arms like a crazy chicken. But then the idea settles like cement into my bones.

Some nights, the wind screeches so angrily against the thin walls of our donga, I'm sure they will come crashing down. I inch closer to Amma, who sleeps next to me, and I wait for the world to stop shaking. Only in the deep purple hours before morning is the camp quiet. When the kookaburras start calling, it is as if the world outside has erupted into laughter. But inside, amongst the sleeping detainees, the sounds of grinding teeth and nightmares murmur softly in the dark.



I don't know if Appamma would approve or laugh at Mr. Yusuf, who has sewn his lips together and buried himself up to his chin as a form of protest in the

middle of the yard. He has been there since this morning, his eyes closed, refusing to move. At first, a crowd of other refugees gathered around him, shouting and shielding him from the guards who were trying to remove him from his hole. But after a while the guards gave up and slowly the crowd moved away. In the afternoon, my friend Arun and I tiptoe closer to have a look.

The thread that zigzags across his lips is black and crusted. It looks like a centipede, feasting on his mouth.

I have never spoken to Mr. Yusuf. He is from Afghanistan, where the government killed Hazara people like him. Just like the government killed Tamil people like us in *Illankai*. Mr. Yusuf speaks mostly in Hazaragi. All the refugees from different countries eat meals together and share the yard, but we can't talk much between groups because we don't understand each other's languages. I've seen some of the other Tamil people here, who can speak a little English, talking to refugees from other places. But the Hazara children always play in their group while the Tamil children stay in theirs. Mr. Yusuf is always protesting. Once he climbed up to the roof of his donga and they showed him on the Australian news. Even though we had already seen it happen, everyone crowded around the TV in the common room that night to watch Mr. Yusuf waving his banner on the roof before the guards brought him down.

"They say he is going to be deported soon," whispers Arun, as we back away.

Mr. Yusuf has been at Kimberley for about three years now and he was in the Christmas Island camp for even longer before that. He is here alone. Some say his family came with him, but have already been released into the community. Others say they never made it to Australia and are waiting for Mr. Yusuf to bring them to Australia once he becomes a resident. Arun believes Mr. Yusuf has no family.

"He must've left them all behind when he ran away," says Arun. "That's why he can't go back."

I don't look at Arun. Instead, I watch the shadow of Mr. Yusuf's head grow longer as the sun recedes behind him. Soon it will be dinnertime and the earth will go cold. I shudder, imagining Mr. Yusuf's head lolling like a forgotten doll's in the dark.

“My Appa says all the men that came on our boat will also sew their lips and go on a hunger strike next week,” says Arun. “Some of them are going to swallow razors.”

We go back to playing hopscotch. The lines we drew in the sand this morning have faded, leaving the borders between squares broken and blurry. But this doesn't bother Arun, who hops neatly from one step to the next.

“My Amma says it is wrong to be so careless with your body,” I murmur, retracing the lines with my toe.

“What would she know,” Arun scoffs. He jumps over his stone and lands hard with both feet on the ground. “My Appa says they are closing this place down and we will all be sent back. Back to Christmas Island, or Nauru, or all the way to *Illankai*.”

“Anyway, we won't be released into the Australian community if we don't show these people that we would rather die than go back,” Arun adds. “That's what my Appa says.” Reaching the last two steps of the hopscotch grid, he flips around and starts hopping back.

I say nothing.

When the Australian Navy ship that intercepted our boat brought us to the Kimberley Detention Centre, we were excited because we had finally made it to Australia. We didn't think that, a year later, we would still be in detention here. Arun and I were on the same boat, but only became friends at the camp. Arun, who has two older brothers, is not shy like me. He was the one that initiated our friendship by asking me to play with him, and although I know it was only because his brothers wouldn't let him join their older group of friends, I am grateful to have someone to talk to. I have never had a friend my age before. We will both turn nine in a few months.

“You know what else they're saying?” says Arun. He has already finished nine rounds of hopscotch without failing, but instead of aiming his stone for the final half circle at the end of the grid, he squats down and plays with the dirt, “I heard my brothers talking. They're saying they will let the children choose to stay with the parents, or be released.”

Something grips painfully at my chest, twisting and twisting like Amma's ragged old bra when she washes it every night.

"What do you mean?" I gasp.

"I heard my brothers talking. They're saying the Australian government will let the children join the outside community." Arun pauses. "And maybe the mothers too. If they are not LTTE."

He does not look at me. My lips have gone dry. I bite them hard and look away. Arun has his brothers and his whole family with him, but I have only Amma. She is nothing like Arun's mother who is loud and bossy, just like stupid Arun, and always clucking over her sons. Amma keeps to herself. But I've seen the way Arun's mother and some of the other women in the camp look at Amma. Their eyes narrowed and nostrils flaring, as if she were a dirty taste they wanted to spit out. Before I can stop it, the world turns to water and I look up, trying to blink the tears back into my burning eyes.

"We should go in. Amma will be waiting," I mutter.

That night I dream of Mr. Yusuf in his hole. His mouth is still stitched up, but his eyes are wide open, bulging out of his head. Suddenly, his turban unravels and his hair balloons into a wild, curly mane that whips about in the wind. His face is Appa's and his eyes are red. The earth constricts around his neck, dragging him down. I grab the sides of his face and try to pull him out, but when I look back down, it is now Amma's face I am holding. The dream dissolves.

It takes me a while to remember where I am when I wake up. In my dreams, I keep sliding from one landscape to the next – as if there are no seas, or walls, or barbed wire fences separating us from the world. I can't seem to tell the red dust of *Illankai* and thorny grass of Kimberley apart, and people who belong firmly in my past keep crossing over and talking to the people in my present, as if they have always known each other. I move freely in my dreams, without guards, or sirens or loudspeaker announcements dictating where I can go. I can walk straight out of this musty bed, through the falling echoes of kookaburra cries, backwards in time. I can throw open the door of our donga and, just like that, step back into Appamma's kitchen in *Illankai*.



“I’m only waiting to die in my own home,” Appamma said to me once. Then she laughed, each breath raking at her throat. It was nearly three years ago. We were sitting in the kitchen, squeezing the small hard limes to which Appamma later added sugar and water and sold by the roadside. It was my job to pick out any seeds that fell into the juice, so none of her customers would be left with a bitter aftertaste.

“You know Raju, in our family-home in Mulliyawalai, there were many fruit trees in the garden,” said Appamma. “Mango trees dripping with sweet fruit, pawpaws as red as the setting sun, jak, bananas, coconut, anything you wanted we had in our garden.”

Though I’d heard her talk about her land in Mulliyawalai before (it was all Appamma ever talked about) saliva collected in my mouth at her words. I kept it there, savouring its wetness before swallowing. I had never seen this ancestral garden. After Appamma’s family was displaced, their home had been made part of an Army High Security Zone and no one but Appamma believed we would ever be able to return. Each time she went with the other villagers for protests or negotiations, she came back bristling with anger, clutching her land deeds in one hand and her sweat-soaked handkerchief in the other.

“You’re a fool to believe those army people,” Appa muttered the last time this happened. He was lying on his back, with his arms crossed behind his head, under the moonlight that shuttered through the holes in our roof. On most nights, Appa would come home in a dark mood, slap down the money he had made from his three-wheeler hires on the table, and retreat to his corner. Appamma would then quietly collect the money and set down his dinner, though on many nights there was neither money nor dinner.

“It’s not them I believe,” Appamma retorted, looking hurt. But before she could say more, Appa shrugged and rolled in towards the wall, turning his back to her. The hurt in Appamma’s eyes deepened.

“It’s not the army I believe,” she told me again that day, as we made lime-juice together. The story of Moses and the Israelites who travelled forty years to the Promised Land was Appamma’s favourite story from the Bible. Appamma

believed God would part the high army barricades like he did the Red Sea and someday lead her back home.

“It is your *oor*, your home,” she said to me, though I had never known or lived in this *oor*. I was born in the Menik Farm camp, just before the war ended. Menik Farm was where Tamil people like us, who had to leave our homes to escape the bombs, ended up. But even after the war ended, the government wouldn’t let us leave the camp or go back to Mulliyawalai. When I was five, our family was resettled in Kepapillavu. In the tin-house village of Kepapillavu, we had a square piece of earth, as hard and unyielding as the sun that beat down upon it. There were no big trees to climb, or offer up fruit to a hungry boy. When Appamma talked about the trees in her ancestral garden in Mulliyawalai, the snake in my stomach started gurgling and writhing. It grew louder and louder until neither of us could ignore it anymore.

“Look at how restless you are, Raju,” Appamma finally said to me that day with a frown. “If you can’t concentrate on the job, you better go out and play.”

I nodded and meekly left the table, my eyes lowered. As I sidled past her, Appamma took my hand and pressed a lump of sugar into it. When my eyes darted up in surprise, I saw that she was avoiding my gaze. I heard Appamma’s stomach purr softly as I turned, without a word of thanks, and walked away.



That night Amma and Appa had another fight. They had been arguing ever since Amma started working in town. I often heard other men and women in the village fighting inside their houses, throwing their voices at each other, shrieking and yowling like stray cats in the night. But when Amma and Appa fought, there was no shouting. Instead they hissed and spat over my head, as I lay between them on the mat, still as a log, pretending to sleep.

“Why do you come home so late?” Appa growled, his voice sending shivers down my spine.

“You think I like sitting behind a sewing machine all day?” Amma hissed back. “The longer I can work, the more money I bring home for this family.”

Appa's hand slammed into the ground just above my head.

"Forget about making money!" he hissed. "I am the man of this house. It is my responsibility to earn money. You should be home taking care of our son. Besides, if you want so badly to make money, you could help my mother."

I felt Amma's body shaking beside me. For a moment I wondered if she was crying. Then I realised she was laughing. I bit at the edges of my tongue, trying to stop the sob that rose suddenly up my throat.

"Just don't be such a fool, Rajesh," said Amma. A snort escaped her and hung like a smelly fart in the air. "You know that juice business amounts to nothing. If this family relied on your mother's income, we would be sucking limes and eating sugar for the rest of our lives."

I wished she wouldn't whisper so fiercely. There was no furniture in this house, no cupboards or settees, to absorb the sound. Nothing but limp bodies with their ears pressed to the floor – three in this room and one more in the next.

"There is still the money I make from my three-wheeler hires," said Appa. "That is enough."

"What money?" spat Amma. "You know that is hardly any better than the juice. At least we can drink juice when no one buys. But what to do with your petrol? Whether you waste it driving up and down looking for passengers in this godforsaken village, or it sits there boiling in your tank. What can we do with it, ha? Drink it? Or maybe I should pour it over my head and light myself on fire."

I held my breath. There was a cricket cackling loudly in the room, but I couldn't tell where it was. Its voice, amplified by each silent second in between, echoed mockingly. I kept my eyes shut tight and attempted to stretch my body into a straighter line between my parents, trying not to flinch as they pressed closer.

"Shut up. Bitch."

Appa's breath was on my neck, the small hairs on my nape stood at attention.

“Who took you in when the Tigers chewed you up and spat you out? You think there’s any future left in this country for a Tiger woman? What makes you think those army fellows won’t find out about you, douse you in petrol and set you on fire one day?” he snarled.

Amma said nothing. Her silence expanded, feeding on every little sound of the night, until I had no space left to breathe. I wanted to reach out and curl into her belly. But I couldn’t move. I lay stone-still between them and waited. My only source of comfort, a low snoring, coming from the next room.



A few days passed, and the conversation faded in my mind. Amma now came home earlier and Appa came home later. They hardly talked to each other at all except with grunts and nods and, at night, they slept facing outwards. Not knowing which side to turn to, I lay on my back between them. Often, I thought about tapping Appa’s back with a finger, thinking he might turn around if I did. But, in the end, I always crept up to Amma and rested my forehead on the knots of her spine. I would feel them quiver and soon she’d turn around and hold me close.

During the day, Appamma and I continued business as usual. We joked and laughed louder than ever and when Appamma threw her head back, letting the mirth froth and boil over her body, I also stuck my chest out and shook with all my might. Appa didn’t approve.

“Laughing like that doesn’t suit a young boy,” he said once, frowning. But this only made Appamma laugh louder.

“Don’t be so serious now,” she told him, but the joke trailed off her lips as he stalked away. I was angry at Appa for trying to take away our laughter. For ignoring Amma, and making Appamma worry by coming home later each night. So every day I waited, watching from the corner of my eye, for Appa to enter the room. Then I made silly faces, or said something funny to get Appamma laughing. Together, we punished him with our laughter.

Then a whole night passed and Appa didn't come home. No one in the house slept. Appamma sat by the window with her rosary wound around one hand, gazing out into the black night. Amma put me to sleep on the mat, but I awoke when I felt the warmth of her body slip away in the early hours of the morning. She had gone to stand by the window with Appamma.

Just as the darkness was lifting outside, Appamma let out a sharp cry and ran to the door. It opened and Appa stumbled in. His shirt was torn and there was mud on his face and elbows. Both Amma and Appamma ran to help him but he shrugged them off and lowered himself to the ground. When he tipped his head back and rested it on the wall, I saw that his eyes were swollen and his mouth was bleeding.

"What happened to you my son?" Appamma was crying, trying to wipe his face with her sari.

"Raju, get a bucket of water!" Amma barked at me. She ran to get soap and cloth to clean Appa's wounds. When I got back, she dipped the cloth into the water and began to wipe off the mud and blood from his arms.

"What happened?" she asked, eyes fixed on the spot she was scrubbing.

"Police," he croaked. "Two of them."

Appamma wailed loudly, the sound twisting weirdly in the morning light.

"Why?" she cried. "Why did they do this?" Appa winced as if it hurt him to move when she took his face in her hands.

"They were drunk. Got in the three-wheeler for a hire and refused to pay at the end. When I told them to pay up, they hit me, called me LTTE and tried to arrest me," Appa spoke in quick bursts, spitting the words out like poison. "I refused, told them they couldn't arrest me without a warrant. The dogs, they came at me again, but I was ready this time. I hit them back. Really laid into them."

Amma's hands dropped away. Her face was frozen in horror.

"You fool!" she hissed. "Now they will come after you!"

Appa sneered, revealing blood red teeth.

“No they won’t. They won’t remember my face. It was too dark and they were too drunk,” he said. “Anyway, I told them they didn’t know what they were talking about.” He sneered again at Amma, cocking one battered eye open to look at her. “I told them they had the wrong person. I told them my wife, she’s the boss in our house.”

I watched Amma’s face turn grey. Appamma’s hands flew to her mouth and I felt the heat spiraling off Amma. Unsure what was happening, I stood rooted to the spot, unable to take my eyes off that crooked red smile on Appa’s face.

“What have you done?” Amma spoke softly, stepping backwards, away from Appa. “What have you done?”

“I told them to stop wasting their time kicking useless shits like me if they wanted the big catch,” said Appa. “I am just one of the pariah dogs she’s fucking. She’s the Tiger.”

I didn’t understand what he was saying, but I wanted him to stop. Seeing Amma’s face, I started to cry. Something was horribly wrong because her whole body was shaking. Appamma tried to place a hand on Amma’s shoulder. “It will be alright. They were drunk, they will not remember.”

But Amma brushed her hand away. I ran to her, tried to put my arms around her waist, but it was like she couldn’t see me. She just kept stepping backwards until she was backed into a corner.

“What have you done?” she kept saying, her eyes locked on Appa. “What have you done?”



In the weeks that followed, we lived like cockroaches. Appa stayed in the house until his wounds were healed and Appamma and I stayed with him. Only Amma left the house to go to work. Each morning she peered from the window, checking to see if there were any army soldiers or police on the road outside. When she was sure the road was empty, she stepped quickly out the door, her fists clenched and eyes still darting from side to side. We kept all our doors and windows locked and waited nervously for her to return in the evening. It took

a long time before Amma would even look at Appa again. There was no more laughter. In between tending to Appa, all Appamma seemed to do was pray, every morning and night, eyes fixed on some point I couldn't see.

If Appa felt sorry for what had happened, he never said anything. No one ever mentioned that night again, but something about the way Appa sat with his legs crossed and head bent, answering dutifully when Appamma spoke to him, made me think he was sorry. Seeing him curled up in his corner like a wounded animal, I once crept up to him and patted his head. When he flinched, I tried to quickly pull my hand away, but he caught it and touched it to his lips with a small smile. I couldn't remember the last time Appa had smiled, or even looked at me so secretly. Like we were sharing a joke. Just the two of us. I giggled and the weight of the past few days slipped right out like a burp. I bounced away. Eventually, when the scars on his face had faded, Appa went out in the three-wheeler again. Then Appamma and I started selling our juice and slowly things returned to normal.

When Amma brought up the idea of sending me to the local school starting next term, we thought she had finally forgiven him. Appamma looked relieved and quickly agreed to talk to the priest that ran the school. I got excited, picturing myself as one of the smartly dressed school children who walked past our juice stall on their way to school each morning. They were always so chummy within their packs, chattering and joking loudly. Then, to make things even better, Amma said she would take me to the garment factory with her to get a brand new uniform.

"We must get a uniform that will fit him properly," she said. She watched Appa carefully, but he still couldn't look her in the eye and simply nodded into his food. Appamma chuckled, and pinched my cheek. Hearing her laugh made me grin even wider.

"Our baby is growing so fast," she said. It was true that my knees were starting to look knobby below my shorts and the shoulders of my favourite shirt were so tight they were giving me an old-man stoop.

I woke up restless with excitement on the day Amma was to take me to the garment factory. As usual, Appamma was sitting by the window, praying.

"Appamma," I called softly.

She turned to look at me, the talcum-powder on her cheeks glittering in the morning light.

“Appamma, what will happen to our juice business when I start going to school?” I asked playfully, wedging myself between the folds of her sari. She smiled and swept the hair off my forehead. She rubbed the mucus from my eyes and gently pulled my nose downward.

“When you have finished your studies and become a big-boss businessman, you can take it over.” She laughed.



The morning cool was evaporating fast as Amma and I walked along the dusty red road to the bus stop. We caught the bus into town and, though it rattled on like a grumpy old man, the bus did not break down that day. I sat with my palms pressed together between my legs, wishing I hadn't drunk so much water on the way. Once, I glanced at Amma sitting next to me. Her eyes were closed, and the wrinkle between her brows glistened with sweat. I had the handkerchief Appamma had given me in my pocket and, for a moment, thought to reach up and touch Amma's forehead with it. But I didn't.

The bus was heaving by the time it reached Mullaitivu town. We got down, Amma gripping my hand as we left the bus stand behind us. We walked along the main street. Past cheery pink shops, paint peeling off the walls, and grease-stained garages with bicycle parts hanging from the ceiling. The garment factory looked a lot like the garages and was about the same size, except that instead of wheels hanging from the ceiling, the wheels were attached to sewing machines, attached to tables, attached to feet that kept them spinning. Amidst the whirring machines stood a tall, thin man dressed in long brown pants and a buttoned shirt. His belt gleamed like water in the sunlight.

“Anna, my son,” Amma said, holding me out like a garment for inspection. The man came towards us, drawing with him a trail of twitching heads as the sewing women glanced quickly at us and away. His eyes swept over me.

“How old?” he asked.

“Five,” said Amma. I caught his eye only for a second and looked down, Amma’s fingers were digging into my shoulders. The man nodded and moved away. Amma let go of one shoulder and drew me to her side with her other arm. We began to follow the man to the back of the factory.

He struck me as rather scary, but then Amma showed me the crisp white shirt and blue shorts that would be my school uniform and I forgot my fear. It was perfect. The material slipped through my fingers like sifted flour. The man gave us more clothes. He picked them hastily from a dusty box and threw them our way without looking. A few skirts and blouses for Amma and t-shirts for me, but these were slightly discoloured and uneven in places.

Amma carefully folded our new clothes, and put them in a plastic bag. I could feel the other women watching as we left the factory but, seeing Amma’s expression, I dared not turn or wave. She stared resolutely ahead and the plump plastic bag swung like a dead chicken between us. The sky outside was gloomy. Dark clouds were rolling in fast from the East. Cool wind slipped in through the sleeves of my shirt, making it billow like a parachute and tickling my armpits. When we came to the bus stop, Amma stopped, staring at the empty road for a long time. Then she took my hand and walked away.

“Aren’t we going home now, Amma?” I said, looking up at her.

“No,” said Amma. People, sensing rain in the air, were walking faster. A tattered poster of some politician, half the smile ripped off his face, fluttered past us. Amma unpinning the fall of her sari and draped it over her head. She fished out a cap I hadn’t noticed before from the bag and pulled it over my head.

“We are going to Amma’s friend’s house, *mahan*,” she said, pinching my chin affectionately. “Promise you will be good and listen to Amma?”

I gulped. I had never heard Amma talk about any friends before. I didn’t think Appa and Appamma would like us going to a stranger’s house and I was restless to go home, imagining myself trying on the new uniform and the way Appamma’s face would light up watching me. The brim of the cap fell over my face, casting a long shadow on the world.

“But what if it rains and there’s no bus to take us home, Amma?” I asked timidly.

“We’re not going home, Raju,” said Amma. I blinked up at her. A ghost rain had begun to fall. I couldn’t yet feel it but watched the rain leave faint dots on the road. As the raindrops overlapped, the stains on the road grew darker and larger.

“We’re not going home tonight?” I asked.

“We’re not going home,” she replied.



Mr. Yusuf is gone and the hole has been filled in as if he’s never been here. At first, we are careful to avoid the spot when we play in the yard but, as the days pass, people seem to forget. Soon Arun and I can’t pinpoint where it was, as if the hungry earth has swallowed the hole and Mr. Yusuf with it. No one knows for sure what happened to him. The adults in our donga argue loudly about whether the authorities have moved him to a hospital, or prison, or another camp. Some, like Arun’s father, insist it doesn’t matter because he will be deported in the end anyway.

“One man is not enough, too easy to hide and move. We need numbers! The more people striking, the stronger we will be,” he cries. “They will put us in the news and then the people on the outside will know. They will have to take notice!”

Heads nod as the whole donga rumbles in agreement.

So the following week, all the Tamil men and some of the women in the camp go on a hunger strike. Many of them have sewn their lips together like Mr. Yusuf and sit by the fence holding cardboard signs. Arun’s older brothers are also there, sitting on either side of their father. I can’t read the signs, but Arun points out the English word ‘NO’. It flashes at me amongst the waves of unknowable scribbles. When the other non-Tamil detainees in the camp see us, they too come with their signs. One of the Hazara men holds up a picture of a blank, outlined face with a question mark in the middle. As the sun rises higher

in the sky, the crowd gets fatter and longer, uncoiling like a snake along the length of the fence.

Amma doesn't join in the protest. Even when the women and children who are not on hunger strike go out to watch and stand by the protesters, she doesn't leave our donga. Watching Arun's mother standing behind her husband and sons, her fist raised in the air and the sweat trickling slowly down her face, I feel shame stir in my stomach. I leave Arun with his family, and go back to the donga. It is empty except for Amma who is sitting on the bed, knees drawn to chest, staring into space.

"Amma," I whisper, touching her gently on the elbow. "Aren't you coming out?"

She starts and blinks at me. It is as if every inch I have grown over the past year in this camp has eaten away at her body. The taller I become, the more my mother seems to shrink.

"No. How nice to have some quiet in here, some peace to think," she says.

"But Amma everyone is protesting outside. Come and see!" I pull at her sleeve, hoping that if I'm quick, she won't have time to resist. But she doesn't budge.

"What is the point," she mutters. "Who will listen to them shouting in this godforsaken desert?"

Booming cheer rises from outside. It is like the protestors are mocking her. I watch her sit there, barely reacting to the sound, and the shame that has been pressing inside me explodes.

"How will they hear you if you don't say anything?" I cry, pushing away her sleeve that I was holding onto. The force of my action makes her lose balance and she bangs her elbow painfully into the metal bedpost. She gapes at me in surprise for a moment.

"Why are you so upset, *mahan*?" She winces and reaches out to me, but I move away.

“You never say anything! When they talk about you and call you a bad person, you pretend like it’s not happening! You don’t try to make friends, you don’t want to get involved. Why did you bring me all the way here and just give up, Amma?”

She looks stunned. Her lips open and her eyebrows that are usually drawn firmly together come undone.

“I haven’t given up, Raju. We will get out of here,” she says finally.

“No, no we won’t!” My voice cracks. I start to cry. “Haven’t you heard? They’re closing this place down, Amma, they’re sending us away. They’re going to separate us. They will send you back without me.”

I taste the snot and tears on my lips. It feels like everything I’ve been holding in since that conversation with Arun, all the thoughts, dreams and memories are being scraped out of me with every sob. Amma draws me close, holding me against her chest. She coos softly and strokes my head.

“Listen to me, *mahan*. They won’t separate us. I have written a letter to the immigration authorities asking them to review our case. Soon they will call us for a hearing. At the hearing, we will tell them we are all each other have left in this world. They won’t be able to separate us. They won’t send us back.”

I look up, blinking back the tears. I want to believe her, but how can she be so sure? What if she is lying to me again? Suddenly, the questions I have been longing to ask her for so long burst out.

“But why can’t we go back Amma? What about Appa and Appamma?”

She looks at me like I have slapped her. I can’t watch the tears welling in her eyes, so I look away and see a blur of guards running past our window. When I look back at her, Amma’s expression has hardened, her eyebrows knotting together once more.

“We can never go back, Raju,” she says. “Remember you must never tell anyone about Appa or Appamma. Forget about them. Forget about going back.”

I push away from her. The tears dry up but my eyes burn even brighter.

“Why?” I look her in the eye, my voice trembling. “What if I can’t forget? What if I don’t want to forget?”

Amma stares back at me. I have never challenged her authority before. My heart is thumping in my throat, but now that the words are out, a new feeling of power turns and twists inside me, struggling to get out. I think, for the first time, about disobeying her. Punishing her at last for what she did. She looks scared, like she has finally realised I am no longer the little boy she tricked into running away.

“Raju, please, if they find out about your Appa, they will send us back. Back to that hellhole! You don’t know, *mahan*, you’re too young to understand.” Her voice rises in a panic. “There is no future for us there, *mahan*. We can start a new life here, you and I. We can be free.”

The air crackles. It is nearly evening and soon the kookaburras will start their cackling, drawing the day to a close. Suddenly an electronic voice echoes across the camp.

“All detainees are advised to return to their units immediately. All detainees are advised to return to their units immediately.”

I look back at Amma, taking in the way her hair has frizzed under the Australian sun, flyaway strands sticking out in every direction. When did the skin under her eyes become so dark and crinkled, or has she always looked that way? I can’t remember. She is all I have left here and I don’t want them to take her away from me. But she feels so far away, as if she is looking right through me at a whole other, terrifying world. I think about what she has done, what she is asking me to do – *lie, forget, lie, forget* – the words echo in my head.

“No,” I say. “I don’t want to lie and I don’t want to forget.”

The sobs threaten to come roaring back up my throat, and not wanting to hear her plead, I turn and run.

Outside, the sky has turned to pink fire. The whole camp is out here, crowding at the fence, ignoring the guards that hang back uncertainly and mumble every few seconds into their walkie-talkies. There is new group of people gathered on the other side of the fence, also holding signs and banners. I don’t understand what these say either, but some of the signs have big hearts drawn on them. Lights flash everywhere and I see some people with heavy-looking gadgets mounted on their shoulders circling around like bees.

“Where have you been?” Arun cries, running up to me. I hastily wipe my face with my sleeve, but he doesn’t seem to notice that I’ve been crying. “Do you

see the news crew with their cameras? They've been here since this afternoon! We heard them arguing with the guards, trying to get in so they can interview us.

"And see that lady standing in front of that camera there?" He points to a tall woman in a blue suit, standing with her back to us while talking into a large camera. "She is reporting live. We are on the news!"

His excitement sounds dull and stupid to my ears. Without thinking, I blurt out the same question Amma had asked me moments before.

"What's the point?"

Arun looks at me like I've gone mad.

"What, are you stupid? It's the news, Raju! That means everyone in Australia is watching, and maybe even in other countries they will show us on TV. Already people have come to support us from the outside, can't you see? It worked! People are going to help us get out," he cries, slapping an arm around my shoulder. When I don't respond, he walks back to his family shaking his head. I stand there not knowing what to do or where to go.

Then, like a train approaching from a distance, we hear another crowd of voices coming from the desert. Everyone cranes their necks to look, and the news reporters shift the heavy cameras around, the woman in blue running to reposition herself. At first their chanting is jumbled and disjointed, but soon it floats across with the wind, loud and clear.

"Go back home. GO BACK HOME."

This group is also holding signs and although I can't read them, once again the word NO jumps out at me from everywhere. They march forward, holding the Australian flag like a shield before them. Some of them wear hats and masks, others have on sunglasses. Their faces red and puffing, they keep coming.

I can't think because the voices are crowding in my head – *go back home, go back home*. They demand that I find a place other than here, where I'm supposed to belong. Where I can escape to and be safe. But we never really had an *oor* back home. All I see are faces – Amma, Appa, Appamma – the latter two already starting to blur at the edges.

The kookaburra's cries break out into the evening, as the two groups of protestors outside clash. Detainees run to the fence, their fingers curling into the grooves between the metal, shaking it in anger. But the fence is too strong, it will not move, so instead their bodies flutter like puny rags in the wind.

*Shenali Perera was born and brought up in Colombo, until her family migrated to Australia in 2008 when she was thirteen. Her story was inspired by the story of a woman she encountered at a Vanni village during the Write to Reconcile 2016 residential workshop. The fictionalised Kimberley Detention Centre in her story is based on the experiences of refugees in Australian detention centres and camps, and especially the off-shore camps in Nauru and Manus Island. Shenali has a passionate interest in linguistics and hopes to contribute creatively to inter-ethnic and intercultural dialogue through her writing in the future.*

## *Poems*

Dishani Senaratne

### *Justice*

Storming the courthouse  
like a swarm of angry bees,  
hundreds of people  
demanded justice  
for Vidhya<sup>1</sup>.

“If only the boys<sup>2</sup> had been here!  
Those bastards would have been killed!  
Our boys knew how to respect women!”  
Screamed the mob at the arbitrators of law.

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1 Vidhya Sivaloganadhan was gang raped and murdered allegedly by her neighbours/relatives on her way to school in Jaffna in 2015; one of the accused was said to have had a dispute with her family. Many demonstrations were held as a sign of protest, especially in the Jaffna peninsula, during which strict preventive mechanisms against sexual violence and capital punishment for rapists were demanded. One demonstration that was held near the court turned violent and led to the banning of protests in Jaffna. Peaceful protests, however, were held in various parts of the country. The case is still pending at courts.

2 Term used for the LTTE

At night  
as usual  
these same people

wept for their loved ones  
killed  
by the boys.

***Dreams***

A flickering lamp-post  
at the junction,  
a howling dog  
in the distance.

Stringy and  
curly-haired,  
the young man  
dark as a nightmare,  
lies on the road,  
naked.

Thousands of ants  
in his open mouth,

as if feasting  
on the honey of his words.

He attended the  
*five classes*,<sup>3</sup>  
dreamt of  
wiping away the tears  
of the poor.  
“Never got married,  
but laboured day and night  
for his family,”  
the village folk  
murmured  
not daring to go retrieve him.

His cherished red wristband,  
given by a *sahodaraya*<sup>4</sup>  
lies torn apart,  
under his broken wrist.

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3 The JVP conducted lectures, especially during the youth insurrection, to educate the youth on their political doctrine. They were commonly known as the *five classes*.

4 A term that literally means ‘brother.’ It is often used among the male members of the JVP to address each other.

***Lament***

I will never forget  
the day  
you decided,  
to join the army.

Running your fingers  
through my hair  
that night,  
you promised to attend,  
our doni's<sup>5</sup> *idul kata gama*<sup>6</sup>.

Under the murmuring Bo tree  
at the village temple,  
you promised to build  
an upstairs house  
with Italian gates<sup>7</sup>.  
Carrying our doni

---

5 A term of endearment for a daughter.

6 A ritual to mark the introduction of solid food to an infant.

7 An equivalent expression (*Italigettu*) is used in Sinhala, which literally means Italian gates - large ornate gates often seen at the entrance to the houses of migrant workers, especially those who have worked in Italy.

in your hands,  
your eyes twinkled  
just like the pahans<sup>8</sup> we lit.

Because you were buried  
in that sealed coffin,

I could not touch  
your rough hands.  
I could not run a finger over  
that raised birthmark on your chin,  
which I would stroke  
as we lay together.

Now, I show our doni  
where your tomb is.  
Yet, to me you  
are not in this tomb.  
You lie  
elsewhere,  
far away.

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8 A type of lamp that symbolises the wisdom of the Lord Buddha.

***Another Wasted Island*<sup>9</sup>**

The war heroes  
wearing pirith<sup>10</sup> strings  
killed  
for their country.

The freedom fighters  
praying to Shiva  
killed  
for their cause.

Where have they all gone,  
these fallen?  
To heaven  
or  
hell?

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9 The title is derived from T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*.

10 *Pirith* is the recitation/chanting of the word of the Buddha.

## *The Girl in the Headscarf*

Hafsa Mazahim

I typed quickly, preparing my speech for the workshop promoting peace I would be part of tomorrow. My hurried breath drummed in my ears and I could feel an impending headache gathering at my temples. *It's been five years since we were freed from the curse of bloodshed. Today Sri Lanka remains an exhausted, disturbed society still hot from the embers of the war. The youth of this country need to make sure this doesn't ever happen again. You may not be responsible for what took place thirty years ago, but you will be responsible for the country you hand over to future generations.*

Tuning out the chattering voices, the clicking of keyboards, and the frenzied printing of my co-workers, I type away, my eyes darting towards the clock. Fifteen minutes more and I would be finally on my way home, putting an end to a tiresome, challenging week.

The clock struck five. I jumped out of my seat, collected my belongings and darted towards the office door.

“Why such a hurry, Mother Theresa?” Siva, one of my most favourite co-workers, called after me.

“Leaving to Ampara tonight for the workshop I told you about. Have to go buy some last-minute things and I don't want to get caught to the office rush,” I cried back as I mentally scanned through my travel checklist.

“*Aaah*, reconciliation, hope, peace. So many issues out there, I don't know how our Mother Theresa is planning to make any change,” he joked as he caught up with me, falling in step as we went down the stairs to the lobby.

“There's always a way, bro. After all, if one spark can cause a fire, then one hand can heal another. You just have to start.”

“But the world has enough Mother Therasas to-”

“Yes, and now it has me and I shall find a way to make a change,” I retorted with a laugh, as I adjusted my headscarf.

Siva laughed too and our merriment echoed in the busy office lobby as we made our way to the exit. I was used to conversations like these; not many people understood the passion I harboured for reconciliation.

“Good luck with the workshop. You’re a feisty little thing and I’m sure nothing can dampen the spark in you.”

“Damn right, son, damn right,” I agreed as we laughed and parted.

Outside the office building, I quickened my pace through the crowded, jostling, well-bricked pavements of Kollupitiya. Heavy clouds gathered in the sky and looking up, I sighed. *Not again.*

A sudden rumble of thunder, and then a drop of water splattered on my forehead. Until a few minutes ago, the sky had been a postcard blue mixed with hues of purple and orange. Now it was turning into gravel grey. *Aiyo*, I groaned as the heavy drops began to drench me, *this is why I should carry an umbrella.* My hijab was certainly no protection against this developing downpour.

I began to hurry. There was a slow-paced old man in front of me, and, huffing, I jumped past him and hastened towards the closest Cargills supermarket, only to be then drenched by a trishaw weaving through a puddle.

“Eyi, thambi nangi, watch where you’re going,” the driver yelled as he sped past.

I closed my eyes for a second, took a deep breath and then exhaled. *Thambi nangi.* I ran towards a nearby awning, counting backwards from 10 in my head to get my temper under control.

This was a tagline that had started popping up recently; a tagline that many Sinhalese men had started using for women and girls like me, in hijab.

My attire, to me, was a symbol of faith and devotion. But today, in Sri Lanka, in the world, it had become a symbol of danger.

Scurrying towards the shelter, I glanced around, hoping to hail a trishaw, and saw one stationed a little further on. I ran towards it and jumped in as the shower moved into a full downpour.

“Ayiye, towards Bambalapitiya, please.”

He glanced up at the side mirror and surveyed me, shoulders hunched, his face a bored mask.

“Excuse me, Bambala-”

“My trishaw is not for halal thambis to sit in and stain.”

I stared at him trying to comprehend what he had just said.

“Get down.” He smirked at my shock and gestured with his jaw, his eyes fixed on mine in the mirror.

For a moment, I refused to budge. A silent battle brewed between us. *Am I to back down in fear, or am I to remind him I too belong in this country, just like him?*

He turned his body and moved his hands towards me. “Get down, woman,” he cried.

I hastily got out, frightened now.

He laughed as he took off, leaving me surrounded by the polluting smoke of his trishaw.

I had lost the battle.

My jaw tightened and my breath quickened, as I stood on the pavement angrily, not caring that I was getting drenched in the monsoon rain.

A honking bus brought me back to my senses and I walked back dejectedly to the awning. I didn’t have it in me to try and stop another trishaw. I just had to wait the rain out.

I had just huddled under the awning, when a message beeped on my phone. *Stay inside your office. I’m coming to pick you up.*

I looked at the message, puzzled. My older brother never came to pick me up from work. Never, unless there was an emergency.

I typed in a quick message telling my brother where to find me and asking him to hurry. I no longer wanted to stay on the road.

I stood silently, playing with the tassels of my hijab with trembling fingers, trying to comprehend the past few minutes. *Why are we suddenly being attacked for being Muslims?* I asked myself, as I had done so often recently. It was an anguished thought.

A bolt of lightning tore across the dark sky and a peal of thunder followed. The bright sunny afternoon had turned into a cold, wet, and gloomy evening.

I looked up at the evening sky that had turned black like the devil's soul. It lit up with lightning. The wind whipped against my shirt and my hijab's edges flicked across my face as I struggled to get my emotions in control.

I found myself thinking of something that had happened a few days ago. I was passing the Malini Bath Kade at the top of my road when a man had said loudly, "Wonder if these Thambi nangis taste different."

He had laughed and his friend had laughed too. A chill had passed down my spine and I had hurried on pretending I hadn't heard.

No one took heed of a Muslim girl standing under the awning as the crowd rushed by. Everyone was ignorant of the fear I now harboured in my heart.

My phone ringing broke through my reveries.

"Salam Umma," I said.

"Where are you?" my mother said urgently.

"I'll be there soon, Nana said he-"

"Are you alone? Remove your hijab," she whispered into the phone.

"What? Why?"

"Just remove it, do as I say. Nana will be there soon."

"Ma..."

"Just do what I say."

"Ma, you're scaring me. What's happening? Why is..."

"There is nothing to be scared of," she cut in. Her voice had a forced calm.

"Just do what I say." Then she got off the phone.

Why was she asking me to remove my hijab? Something she has never done. The cold wind gushed past me and the tiny strands of hair on my hand stood as I shivered. My hands unconsciously made their way towards my hijab as my mother's words repeated in my ears. *Remove your hijab.* Why was my brother coming to pick me up? What was happening?

Exhausted, annoyed, and scared, I let my hijab remain on my head. I was not going to bow down to anyone.

My hijab shall stay where it belongs.

Soon my brother's mud-splattered white Range Rover pulled up by the awning. I dashed through the rain and jumped into the jeep.

My brother, Aqeel Mohamed, was a man who always had a wide grin on his face, showing all thirty-two glistening teeth. But now he was not smiling.

"Salam Nana," I greeted him as I struggled with the seat belt, not taking my eyes off him.

"You won't believe what this trishaw man just said," I continued, babbling now because I was frightened by his expression. "He told me he wouldn't take me in his trishaw because I was a 'Halal Thambi.'" I snorted, my own words sounding incredulous to my ears. "I don't understand what's happening." I fell silent as my brother continued to fumble with his phone, a stricken expression on his face. He was barely taking in what I had said.

"Nana?"

"Watch this." He handed me his phone.

In the video, a mass of people were cheering a monk in his orange sivura raging into the microphone and smiling. "If one of these Marakkalayaas or any of these parayas lays a hand on our Sinhala people," the monk cried, "it will be the end of them all." There was a rousing cheer from the crowd around him. "I won't let these Marakkalayaas take over our country. Sri Lanka was always a Sinhalese country, and it will continue to remain one," Another swell of thunderous applause.

Beads of sweat mixed with rain water trickled down my face. I shivered, but no longer because I was cold. I looked at my brother for a long moment. "What is this? When was this?"

“Today, in Dharga Town - Aluthgama. This is supposed to be a warning to us Muslims.”

Aluthgama. My uncle’s house was there. “Warning? What nonsense. What kind of warning?”

He sighed, sounding defeated. “I don’t know, Chinna,” he said using the endearment of “little one”, which he has used for me since childhood. “Apparently, they are planning to attack as revenge for one of our boys attacking a monk.”

“Attack?” I questioned. “He’s just a monk spewing hate and acting up. He wouldn’t do anything, right?”

Nana remained silent. I looked back at the video, which I had paused. The monk, with his finger pointed up in the air, stared back at me. His eyes harboured such anger, it scared me.

“What nonsense is this?”

“How can a monk screaming so much hate have so much support? This doesn’t make sense.”

“It may spread to Beruwala too.”

My blood turned cold. “Wappa is in Beruwala,” I stammered.

Our ancestral home was in Beruwala, Wappa’s gem showroom too. Suddenly I was so frightened my stomach heaved and nausea rose in me.

“They wouldn’t do anything, would they? They wouldn’t just attack like that? It’s crazy. The government should stop this. Why are they not stopping this man?”

What the trishaw driver had said made sense now. He too had heard this hatred and was strengthened by it. He too was watching Aluthgama and had wanted to provoke me, to spit out his hatred at me in solidarity with that monk.

“Umma spoke to Wappa.” Nana continued, his brows creased, his hands tightening around the steering wheel.

“This meeting is the drizzle before the raging storm.”

I grabbed my phone and began to dial Wappa’s number.

A message immediately came on telling me the mobile was unreachable.

I looked at my brother who nodded in confirmation. He too had been trying to reach our father.

“We just have to wait and see.” His voice was heavy with dread and ambiguity.

I sighed. “Let’s go home, Nana,” I said after a moment.

He gave my hand a small squeeze before he changed gears and we began to move slowly along the busy road.

For a few moments, we travelled in silence. Then he said brusquely, “Remove your hijab till we get home, Chinna.”

Silence filled the car as I slowly unpinned my hijab. The loss of it wrapped around my head made me feel vulnerable.

Staring at the road before me, solemn, stricken, I sat numb on the seat as we made our way home.



“What took you two so long?” Umma wailed as Nana and I pulled up under the portico of our house.

Terror radiated out of her as she ushered us inside, her watchful eyes looking around, like a mother bear protecting her terrified cubs from possible prey. “I was worried sick. Why did you two not answer your phones?”

“Umma, calm down,” Nana softly interjected. “We are safe at home now.”

“My battery was about to die so I put it on airplane mode and forgot to take it off, as always.” I faked a Cheshire grin in an attempt to lighten up the mood.

Her gaze fell on my bared head and then on my shawl, which was on my shoulders. An internal battle raged in her for a moment before her face became stoic. “Go and change you two. I’ll heat the food.” She made her way towards the kitchen.

“Did Wappa call?” I asked, a mix of fear and hope in my voice.

Umma paused, but didn’t turn, as she said, “No, not yet. We just have to hold on to our duas and wait now.”

She left Nana and me standing in the dimly lit hallway, the ticking of the grandfather clock and the humming of the wind our only companions.

The silence in the Mohamed residence that night was unusual because we were a noisy, happy family. I lay on the sofa, resting my head on Umma’s lap as we waited for Wappa to call. Through half closed eyes, I watched Umma mutter the dhikr. “Allahu Akbar... Allahu Akbar, God is great” she recited over and over again, she was placing her utmost trust in the Almighty to get us past these horrors.

Nana sat across from us, staring at his phone. We couldn’t get in touch with any of our relatives there.

The maddening rain and thunderstorm had simmered down and I switched the TV on in the hope of seeing any news about the destruction happening in my hometown. As I flicked through all the local channels, I was stunned to see that not one channel was reporting the destruction that was happening.

Not a soul, other than the victims and perpetrators, knew about the crime.

“Ya Allah.” Nana exclaimed in horror, staring at his phone.

“What? What?” I jumped off the sofa and ran towards him. Umma remained rooted on the sofa, her eyes on Nana.

“They have attacked the Harcourts Pharmacy in Dehiwala. I just got a video of it.”

My eyes widened in horror as I watched this small video shot in a hurry from a phone, sent to Nana through WhatsApp. Dehiwala was just ten minutes away from home.

“But why?” I whispered.

“Harcourts is owned by Muslims,” Umma responded.

I gazed at a destroyed building, one that held equipment that could save a person's life; destroyed because it was owned by Muslims.

The video was cut short due to an incoming call. *Wappa*, the screen read. Nana put him on the speakerphone and before he could say a word, we all cried, "Hello. Hello," "Wappa? Can you hear me?" "Dawood!"

"Pack all the most important documents and keep them ready," Wappa said urgently, his voice filling the living room. "We don't know if this terror will spread more. If we must run, we must be prepared."

For a moment, Umma's face fractured with fear. Then she gathered herself together. "What is happening in Aluthgama, what is happening in Beruwala?"

"They are burning everything. Mosques, houses, shops. They are burning everything." He paused. "The situation in Aluthgama is worse than in Beruwala. They burnt the main mosque in Dharga Town and now we know this violence will spread in Beruwala too."

My father, Dawood Mohamed, was a man who didn't let anything scare him. As a child, he always told me that I shouldn't let anything or anyone bring me down. The faint quiver in his voice scared us as we realised, *anything* could happen now.

"Aqeel, did you get the Harcourts video?" Wappa asked my brother.

"Circulate it around on WhatsApp and Facebook. We need to let everyone know about this."

"Please tell us you are safe," Nana replied.

"I am okay. Don't worry."

"But why isn't any news channel reporting this? Why are we not getting help? Why are they even doing this?" I cried.

"We don't know darling. The situation is much worse than we thought. They are not sparing anyone."

We were silent as we took this in.

"This was pre-planned, wasn't it?" Umma said finally.

His sigh was his response. “We have lost the fight even before we knew it was starting.”

Fear spread in me. We, the Muslims of Sri Lanka, were now in the midst of a battle we didn’t want to fight.

Wappa put us on hold as he was receiving another call. Umma’s sobbing filled the silence. Nana paced up and down.

“Riza... Riza...” Wappa’s voice filled with panic, addressed Umma. “Punchi akka called, they are standing outside my shop to loot it. I must go stop them.”

“Are you mad? Are you mad to go there?” Umma screamed.

My stomach heaved and I hugged a cushion. Nana froze.

“I must, Riza. That shop is all we have. I can’t let them burn it. We will lose millions.”

“Your life is worth more than millions for us, Dawood. Please don’t,” my mother begged. “Please don’t go. Please don’t...”

Umma wailed as the phone went dead. *Ya Allah*, I cried to myself. *This can’t be happening.*

I scrambled towards her, snatched the phone and dialled Wappa’s number again.

*Please answer. Please answer.* The connection was now busy. Umma hugged me tight, sobbing, as Nana slumped next to us and hugged us both.

A buzzing on our phones indicated that we had a new WhatsApp group message. It was from our cousin-brother in Aluthgama, and it said, “*Three men who were trying to protect the mosque in Dharga Town were shot dead*”.

Ummas’ sobs worsened as I continued to hug her tight.

My father, his cousin brother and uncle were politicians who represented the people of Beruwala, Aluthgama, and the majority of the Kalutara District, almost continuously for more than 60 years. But never in their lives, nor in mine, had we seen such a calamity occur in our hometown.

Fear and uncertainty built around me like a wall, as I huddled closer to my mother and brother on the sofa, waiting to hear a response from any of our loved ones.

Finally, exhausted, I walked into my room and stood by the window. The darkness outside made me feel like I had been swallowed by a black hole. A cricket chirped outside, sounding like a ticking bomb. In the reflection, I saw my brother enter my room and stand by the door.

“This is probably how people felt during the war, Nana,” I said without turning around. The tears I had held back all this while spilt down my cheeks. “Daughters and sons in the war zone must have spent nights like us wondering if they would lose their parents, their houses, their lives.”

My brother came up to me, his arms held out and I turned and let him embrace me. “It’s not fair, Nana. All this because of some misapprehension! All this because they think we will take them over. It’s not fair. It just isn’t.”

“I know, darling.” I turned to see that Umma too had walked into the room. She came and wrapped her hands around both of us. “Life is not fair. But we must always remember that Allah is watching us and is with us. Remember what Allah says in Surah Ash-Sharh - *verily with hardships comes ease.*”

At this reminder of our faith, we fell silent, praying for the safety of Wappa and our family members in Beruwala and Aluthgama.

“*Ya hayyu ya qayyumu, bi-rahmatika astagheethu,*” I whispered to the Almighty above. “Help us overcome this calamity. Make everything right.”

The piercing howl of a dog outside sent a chill through me. The grandfather clock struck twelve.



As the rest of Sri Lanka slept that night, on the 15th of June, Aluthgama and Beruwala faced an act of racism that shook the community. In the days that followed, we struggled to make sense of it, to help out in whatever way we could. We had been lucky enough to have Punchi akka, the landlady of the

shop, safeguard Wappa's jewellery showroom, but not many others were so lucky. A lot of Muslims we knew had lost their businesses and people we knew were dead. Our family members packed boxes of dry rations, sanitary napkins, clothes, books, and other aid we had received from people to be distributed to the ten thousand people affected and displaced during the riots.

I watched my aunt, a retired teacher, buzz around the hall like a bee, getting everything in order and coordinating the packing procedure. To my left, I saw my cousin sister at the door thanking yet another lady for dropping off more things.

"*Subhanallah*, I can't believe how helpful people are." Another aunt said as she got off the phone. "Such a horrific thing to happen, and yet we see so many people coming together to help."

"There is so much good in our country, but it's hidden. Unfortunately, calamities have to strike for it to come out," my cousin sister said as she continued to pack.

Settling myself on the windowsill, I scrolled through my WhatsApp messages and saw I had one from Nana, who had travelled to Beruwala this morning to be with Wappa. He had sent us images of the burnt shops, a grieving family, and people seeking shelter in schools. A 150-year-old house belonging to a renowned Muslim family lay bare, looted of its antiques after the owners had fled to safety. I sighed as I scrolled past the pictures he had sent. Houses that had so much life in Aluthgama were now lifeless, full of fear.

*"A mob in Welipenna destroyed shops and houses there. A Tamil guard was hacked to death while trying to protect a chicken farm owned by Muslims. Wappa just got a call with the message."*

Gasps of horror resonated around me as I read the message out loud. Tired of it all, I walked away to my room. My cousins were now shuffling with their phones to get to Nana's images and I heard the gasps of my mother and aunts and cousins as they looked at the destruction.

In my room, I fell on my bed. As I closed my eyes, I remembered the workshop I was to have attended a few days ago. I recalled all the reconciliation work I had done for the past few years. How could I now stand up and promote peace

and reconciliation, when peace was far away from our land? At all workshops, I would always begin my speeches by saying, “I haven’t personally been affected by the war, so I do not know how it feels to be in your shoes. But, all I know is the work I’m doing is because of my genuine passion to sustain peace in Sri Lanka and to make our country a better place – for you and for me”.

Yet now I knew what it was like to live with that fear. The fear of not knowing what was going to happen next, the fear of the eerie night ahead – not sure if the footsteps outside were just passing or bringing my doom.

This fear had killed my passion for promoting hope and peace in my country.

Yet, there were all the people who had come forward to help us. My Sinhalese friend’s words echoed in my ears: “Come to our place, we will keep you safe.” There was so much good in our country, but was that enough to stop the hate?

I got up and went to stand in front of my mirror. In the reflection, I saw a girl I didn’t recognise. One who was weighed down with fear and helplessness; not the one who had existed a few days ago, positive and vibrant.

*My name is Haya Mohamed.*

*I am a Sri Lankan Muslim girl.*

*Will living with this fear in my own country be my new story?*

*My new reality?*

**Hafsa Mazahim** is currently studying to be a Psychologist at the Colombo Institute of Research and Psychology. She hails from a political family in Beruwala and was born and bred in Colombo. She is an active volunteer at Sri Lanka Unites and has worked very closely with them in the field of reconciliation for the past six years. Her story is inspired by her personal experiences during the anti-Muslim riots that broke out in 2014 in Aluthgama and Beruwala. She dedicates this piece to the memory of her cousin brother, Adhil Bakeer Markar (1990-2016), a remarkable young man who, in his short life, worked hard to make Sri Lanka a better place and inspired many people along the way.

## *Homecoming*

Sivahami Vijenthira

It is morning when I step off the plane in Colombo into a solid wall of heat.

I pause as the crowd of arrivals flows around me. Everyone seems to know where to go, even the white tourists. Trailing behind them, I lug my little suitcase past large posters saying, “Welcome” in English and Sinhala, but not, I note, in Tamil. I exchange my Canadian dollars for Sri Lankan rupees, and hire a driver. When I don’t speak Sinhala, he assumes that I am Indian. Already, my skin is prickling. We drive to the city in silence. As we approach the Fort Railway Station, we pass through Pettah, and masses of pedestrians spill from the crowded shops into the narrow roadways, mixing with motorbikes and honking three-wheeled autos. People peer at me through the car windows. I wonder if they also assume I’m not Sri Lankan.

Fort Railway Station is a broad, proud, colonial building, painted white and heaving with people. Amma’s sister, Kalpana Chithi, had offered to pick me up at the airport and escort me North herself, protesting about “a girl-child travelling alone!” but I refuse her offer. For my own reasons, I am duty-bound to take the Northern Line to Jaffna. I will be in the village of Mallakam before nightfall, and she will meet me there. At the station, I buy a bottle of chilled water, and stand in line to try and get a reserved ticket for the noon Yal Devi train. I am too late. The only space left is in third class, where the fan above my seat isn’t working. My cotton dress is already a wet second skin on my back. I struggle to hoist my suitcase onto the tiny metal overhead rack, trying to be careful because of the contents inside.

We begin our seven-hour journey north. Through the open window, I watch corrugated tin roofs give way to the rice paddies, open fields dotted with peacocks, cows resting under palm trees, distant mountains, and impenetrable Neem forests. The only word that comes to mind is “exotic,” a word that normally makes me bristle. If Amma were sitting next to me, she would say, “Nilani, this is how rice is harvested,” “This is where coconuts tend to grow,” “This is why

peacocks are blue,” and then maybe the strangeness out there would settle and begin to feel familiar. Amma would find a way to weave in an anecdote about Appa, too, something warm and creased with retellings. I would hold her hand.

Near Anuradhapura, I buy 10 tiny vadais for 50 rupees from a vendor walking down the aisle. He passes them to me in a paper packet translucent with oil. If Amma were here, we would eat them together. She would chat with the vendor about his business, and maybe about his family, and she would tell him how much she wanted to come back. Amma would have filled these hours with promises and stories in order to convince me to love Sri Lanka as much as she did, despite my anger against this country for taking my Appa from us and driving us out. This is supposed to be her trip; what a waste that it is I who am taking it.

The sun begins to set and something in the air shifts as we pass through the Vanni, where the railway lines have only just been rebuilt and reopened after they were destroyed in the war. The carriage is emptier now, and I stand at an open door to feel the breeze. How lush the North looks despite its reputation as an arid desert, how busy the streets of Vavuniya and Kilinochchi, with their rows of autos, motorbikes, and bicycles waiting for the train to go by so that they can cross the tracks. These towns somehow remind me of the towns around Toronto. They do not need Amma’s explanations to feel familiar. I find myself thinking of the bloody photos I saw online from the Vanni in the final phases of the war. But I cannot place them now in the context of these busy, functioning towns.

For Amma, the dissonance was trying to match those photos to the memories of her childhood. She just could not get the two to fit together. She was so young when she took me to Canada, only 25. Now I am 25 and I have brought her back. I look up at the metal overhead rack, just to make sure that my suitcase is still safely stowed there, with her urn and her ashes inside.



Four years earlier, Amma's sister, Kalpana Chithi, called to tell us that the Army was finally leaving Mallakam.

It was 6:00 a.m. in Jaffna when she called and 8:30 p.m. in Toronto. Amma and I had just finished eating dinner in the house she had worked so hard to buy, watching through the window as the sun disappeared in a wash of purples and pinks. It was my favourite time of year in Toronto, that liminal period between spring and summer when the mosquitoes weren't yet out, but the grass was thick and soft under our bare feet, and the air smelled of recent rain. We dragged plastic chairs out into the twilight backyard to plan a trip to Mallakam, maybe that summer, after I graduated from university.

We hadn't been to Sri Lanka since Appa was killed in 1990, a few months after I was born. In the midst of a battle between the Army and the LTTE, he joined hundreds seeking refuge at the Jaffna Railway Station, but the Air Force bombed the station and Appa died there. These facts are so old and worn that they hold only a hollow sadness for me, nothing like the burning, roiling, crushing, anguish that I feel now.

The loss of Appa was different for Amma, of course. She told me she had been stoic, even detached, through the banal catalogue of violence and deaths at the time. But marriage and motherhood had changed how she viewed loss and danger. In a haze of grief for him and newfound fear for me, she found an agent, said goodbye to all that she knew, and carried me away from our violent homeland to the calm safety of Canada.

Years later, voice low through gritted teeth, Amma would curse both the LTTE and the Army for forcing her family from their home. Soon after we left, the Army told my grandparents and Kalpana Chithi that they needed the Mallakam house for barracks. Ammappa and Ammamma died in Jaffna Town without ever seeing their house again.

"But you will see our house now, Nilani!" Amma said as we sat out there in our backyard. "You know, of course, that I chose the paint colour for it? I picked a beautiful blue, the colour of the sky. When you enter, there is the living

room. On this side is the kitchen, and here are the bedrooms, and oh, outside the house the well is over here, and we kept chickens over there. Ah, I want to see our mango tree again. Did I tell you that your Kalpana Chithi once tried to climb that mango tree and fell? You think you like those Mexican mangoes from the supermarket, but you don't know how sweet mangoes can be until you eat a Karutha Kolomban!"

Her excitement was irresistible. Her eyes were crinkled and cheeks dimpled. My usual resistance to her Sri Lankan nostalgia fell away. "I can't wait to see you climb that tree to get me a mango," I teased, showing my matching dimples. I always loved that my face was a dusky echo of Amma's, with her full lips, high forehead, and fat cheeks, though she liked to tell me that I looked more like Kalpana Chithi.

We made a list right then of everything she wanted to show me, including the Yal Devi. "After your Appa died," Amma said, "I thought that I would never board a train again. But if the Northern Line is reopened when we go, let's take it together, okay?" She closed her eyes and exhaled. It was hard to know if it was a bittersweet sigh or just exhaustion. She always seemed tired those days, and despite all the doctor visits, we didn't yet know why.

We learned the reason soon enough, at her medical appointment a few weeks later. Ovarian cancer. Our Sri Lanka plans were immediately forgotten in a blur of hospital visits, anguish followed by hope followed by anguish. For a little while after I graduated, we worked together at the bank that had employed her for over a decade, but eventually Amma had to leave her job, and then I quit too, so that I could care for her. On good nights, we would nestle together and I would read aloud from Tamil stories, even though I stumbled over the longer words. On bad nights, I would leave the house after she had fallen asleep to call Kalpana Chithi nine and a half hours ahead, wracked with sobs I didn't want Amma to hear.

When Amma finally died, Chithi and her family weren't given visas to come for the funeral. The Canadian government thought they might illegally stay. Chithi's voice was thick with tears when she called. "Who would have thought, when I said goodbye to her 25 years ago, that she would return only in death?"

It was Amma's final wish for her ashes to be released into the waters of

Keerimalai, the traditional resting place of Sri Lankan Tamils. When she first mentioned it, I told her not to be so morbid, because she was not going to die. I could not understand why she would want to end up across the oceans in a country that was not her home, and that did not want her. But she insisted, and I relented. Now, I was glad I had. After so many years of being by her side, my hands grasped for something more to do for her, something that didn't involve bills or lawyers. It was a relief to have this final responsibility.



By the time the train pulls into Mallakam station in Jaffna, it is evening. The air is pregnant with unshed rain, and there is a pulsating light in the distant clouds. I carefully pull my suitcase off the overhead rack, step off the train onto the nearly empty platform, and look around. My breath catches in my throat. There they are: Kalpana Chithi and her daughters, Vithura and Pavithra, who are on leave from their office jobs in Colombo. I can barely move. I thought that I knew what they looked like, but Facebook has not prepared me for how Pavithra stands just like I do, with one leg bent behind the other, her hands clasped behind her back. Her younger sister Vithura smiles and tucks her hair behind her ear with a fluid motion I know is my own. I feel a flush of deep recognition—I have never met them, but they are family.

My gaze moves to Kalpana Chithi as she steps eagerly towards me. But then she stops, her eyes wide, and says slowly in Tamil, “It’s like I’m seeing my Akka again.” Coming closer, she touches her cheeks to mine and holds my face in shaking hands. Now I see it, too. I whisper back, “It’s like I’m seeing my Amma.” Of course I have seen photos of Chithi before, too, but an ache slides into my chest when she crinkles her eyes exactly as Amma used to. It is a joy to find echoes of myself in my cousins, but with Chithi, this is too much, too soon. I have to look away.

We pile into the narrow backseat of a three-wheeled auto, sitting shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, with Pavithra in the middle and Vithura perched precariously on Chithi’s lap. Pavithra jokes to me that curvy Vithura has gotten too big to sit on laps, and Vithura loudly retorts that at least she isn’t as bony as

Pavithra. I realise that they are trying to put me at ease with this banter, and the kindness of it eases a tension in my jaw I hadn't known was there. I smile back shyly.

We turn right and then left and then right again, driving down dark roads and curving paths to the house that Amma was so eager to show me, where she and Kalpana Chithi were raised, and where I would have been too, if we had not left. My cousins tell me about the collection of neighbours and relatives waiting there to welcome me: who is related to whom, how they knew my Amma, where they live now.

“And are you excited to see the house?” asks Pavithra in English. She reverts back to Tamil to add, “Did Periamma tell you about our hard work cleaning and rebuilding it?”

“Ay, whose hard work? You two weren't even there when your Appa and I went to go look for it,” says Kalpana Chithi, launching into a story her daughters have clearly heard before. “Do you know that it was all forest here, the whole area? There wasn't a single road anymore. We didn't know where the house was. We walked in slowly, slowly, parting the tree branches with our hands, looking. Later, we realised there could have been snakes, or worse!”

Chithi talks about how, when they finally found the house back in 2011, it wasn't a house. It was an empty, filthy concrete husk. In the many years between the Army leaving the village and the owners being allowed to return, nature took back the land, while thieves took all the windows, doors, and furniture that hadn't been destroyed in the war. What little was left was battered, filthy, and littered with pig dung, impossible to match to the home in their memories.

Through the open sides of the auto, we see countless other crumbling concrete houses, their blackened cheeks and toothless maws looking all the more eerie in the settling darkness. Pavithra tells me that many of them belong to people who have gone abroad and can't or won't pay to rebuild a home on the other side of the world. The government only offers funding for houses that have been levelled; these are technically still standing, and do not qualify. If Kalpana Chithi had left with Amma, I realise, their house might still be a ruin like the others. Instead, Amma sent some money and Chithi took out a loan, and after all the years of living in shared rooms in Jaffna Town, the house is finally theirs again.

The auto comes to a stop in front of a solid privacy gate painted bright pink. Tinkling laughter and conversation float out over the corrugated tin fence as we all alight. I clutch my suitcase, nervous and shy, as Vithura opens the gate and announces gaily in Tamil, “We have arrived!” She leads us into the front yard, which is now a clean expanse of grassless brown soil, swept smooth that morning. The invading forest is gone, replaced by an orderly row of hibiscus plants and banana trees along the fence, and the Karutha Kolomban mango tree that Kalpana Chithi once climbed.

And there it is. The house. It is bright and welcoming, with intricately latticed windows, red cement floors, and flower garlands hanging over the broad veranda. A beaming crowd stands waiting outside to greet me. Kalpana Chithi’s husband, Murali Maama, offers me his seat on the veranda and someone hands me a plate loaded with pittu, curries, and mango slices. I eat and smile and nod as guest after guest approaches, plate in hand, to tell me that they once held me in their arms. “Do you remember me?” ask a dozen grey-haired aunties, touching their soft cheeks to mine, smelling of baby powder and eau de cologne. “Poor child. What kind of cancer was it? You look just like her. Did you come here all by yourself? You aren’t married? My nephew is a good man. How long are you staying? Why do you have to leave so soon?”

The uncles join in, telling me sweet stories about Amma and Appa in their younger days, when they were teachers who organised literary circles and dramas for their friends. When we all finish eating, we walk through the house, which is laid out just as Amma described, with the kitchen on one side and the bedrooms on the other. We sit in the living room and I tell them about our house in Canada, our city, Amma’s friends, her job. These men and women are free with their grief and soon I am crying too. It is a relief to cry together for the sides of her life we each did not know. But their tears soon give way to laughter because my Tamil, diluted by Toronto slang and Kollywood movies, sounds nothing like theirs.

“If you ever get in trouble with your Appa,” one uncle tells Pavithra, “ask Nilani Akka to defend you. Murali will laugh so much he’ll forget the punishment.” Kalpana Chithi hits his shoulder in my defence.

“Just marry a Mallakam boy and he will teach you proper Tamil,” says an auntie, gesturing to her son, who seems embarrassed but not resistant to the idea.

“Even your terrible accent is not enough to scare away your suitors,” whispers Vithura, pinching my cheek.

Later, when we are alone on the veranda, I ask her, “Does everyone want to marry a Canadian?”

Vithura glances at Pavithra and says, “Some people prefer the U.S. or Singapore, right Akka?” Pavithra lowers her lids.

“Why?” I ask.

“Why else?” says Pavithra. “We’re the minority here. We’re not accepted. It’s impossible to find success as a Tamil in Sri Lanka.”

“We’re the minority in Canada too,” I say slowly.

“You can’t understand,” she says. “People abroad can post on Facebook about war crimes and justice, but here we can’t say anything to anyone. Do you know that I am the only Tamil in my office in Colombo?”

Vithura nods. “My co-workers ask me, ‘What was it like, do you know anyone who died, were you scared of the LTTE?’ They’re so curious.”

“Do they want us to tell them that there is not a single person from Kilinochchi who doesn’t have a scar or a dead relative?” asks Pavithra. “Would they even believe us if we told them that the Nandikadal Lagoon is filled with bodies, arms, and legs?”

“Appa would not want us to talk about this on the veranda right now. Who knows who is listening?” says Vithura, her voice lowered.

“You see?” says Pavithra, “We are not free. The older generation can’t imagine living elsewhere, but I can’t imagine staying.”

I used to tell Amma that Sri Lanka didn’t want us, but it is suddenly sad to hear the same sentiment from Sri Lankans. “If you leave,” I say helplessly to my cousins, “Who will be left?” What is the use of a rebuilt, repainted house that has no people in it?

The lights are on in the living room, and the latticed windows cast patterned shadows across the veranda. A stray dog noses along the fence as the storm clouds I saw from the train begin to gather overhead, and the rain finally begins

to fall. The weight of my cousins' words settles into my ribs, and I finally understand how hurt Amma must have been each time I argued with her about Sri Lanka. I wonder if she, in turn, knew how hurt I was. All I want to do is speak with her now.

“Amma,” I say in my head, “Did your 25 years in Sri Lanka really outweigh your 25 years in Canada, your job, your friends, our joys and memories? This idealised version of Jaffna that called to you for half a lifetime doesn't exist, Amma. Now you have returned to rest here, but everyone is leaving or already gone.” I pause, uneasy about asking my next question, even in my head. “Amma, are you sure you want this to be your final resting place?”



The morning comes with a wave of sound: vehicles honking, birds chirping, dogs barking. Today, we will release Amma's ashes at Keerimalai. I am weighted with apprehension now, walking from room to room, looking at the framed family photos that fill every wall. Amma was so insistent about her last wish, but was I right to relent? Was I right to bring her remains to this place that is still so complicated by war and grief and division? I am no longer sure. Out of the corner of my eye, I see 5-year-old Amma running out of the house through the veranda doorway, pushing aside the curtain floating gently in the breeze. She goes around the side of the house to peer back in at me through the latticed windows, and I feel a heaviness in my throat for the life she doesn't know is coming. It is only then that I notice that the walls of the house are no longer the sky blue she chose so long ago; they are green.

When the auto comes after breakfast, I climb into the backseat first, holding Amma's urn, followed by Pavithra and Kaplana Chithi. Vithura dons a helmet and sits behind Murali Maama on his motorbike. Maama revs his engine and the auto driver beeps his horn in response, the sound scattering a group of dogs lying in the shadow of a neighbour's fence. We turn left, then right, then left again, driving out of Mallakam and onto wider and wider roads, heading North to the ocean, with a pause for several minutes at the Maviddapuram military check point.

In Canada, soldiers are rarely seen in the cities, but here they are everywhere, always visible. I watch Murali Maama and our auto driver answer the soldiers' questions under the pressing heat of the sun. Maama's eyes are respectfully cast down, his hands trembling. Pavithra and Chithi are silent and still. I realise, with embarrassment, that I know as little about their experiences of war as their Sinhalese co-workers.

At Keerimalai, Murali Maama parks his motorcycle next to the auto, and we leave the driver waiting in the shade of the palm tree, wiping his brow with a cloth. Kalpana Chithi offers me her hand as the five of us walk down to the rocky shore. Two beachgoers stroll along the water in the far distance, watching the waves curl in upon themselves, and a bird hops from stone to stone. The Pandaram stands waiting beside a bundle of hay shaped like a person to represent Amma's body.

The Pandaram begins the ceremony, but I am staring at the hay and thinking of Amma, and I cannot hear him over the roaring in my ears. I taste salt and I'm not sure whether it is ocean or sweat or tears. Time elongates and condenses, and we set the hay afire, and the Pandaram is still speaking. Colours seem to shift and meld together now, and I am shuddering, my face flushed with heat from the flames and from my own pumping blood. From far away comes the sound of a cry that I slowly realise is my own.

Then I feel comforting hands upon my shoulders. It is Kalpana Chithi crying alongside me, and next to her are Murali Maama and Vithura and Pavithra. I lean into Chithi and allow my tears to run with hers, as Vithura and Pavithra put their arms around us both. In Toronto, Amma and I were always alone in any sea of Tamil faces, all familiar, but none family. Here, I am encircled and enveloped by them.

When the fire is complete, the Pandaram mixes the burnt remains of the hay with Amma's ashes in the urn, and then leads me into the water. The waves are a cool shock to my bare feet. I look back at the incomprehensible island that Amma so deeply loved. Then I wipe my tears and turn to the boundless ocean.

The Pandaram says a few final words and hands me the urn. As I bend to release Amma's ashes, I realise that something inside me wanted this tradition to bring clarity and closure. But traditions like this began in a different time, a

time when people were born and died in the same village, even the same house. When home and belonging were simpler ideas. For a moment, I hesitate, holding the urn tipped over the water, wanting more time. But then a wave lifts ever so slightly, enters the urn, and, in an instant, pulls Amma out to the sea.

### **Tamil glossary**

Amma: mother

Appa: father

Chithi: mother's younger sister (aunt)

Periamma: mother's older sister (aunt)

Maama: uncle on mother's side

Akka: older sister or older female cousin

Ammamma: maternal grandmother

Ammappa: maternal grandfather

Pandaram: Hindu man who leads ash-releasing ceremony

***Sivahami Vijenthira** was born in Jaffna and raised in Toronto, where her job now involves organising Canadian citizenship ceremonies. Write to Reconcile 2016 was her first time back in Sri Lanka since the 2004 ceasefire, and this story is inspired by what she saw and heard on that trip.*

## *Poems*

Sukhee Ramawickrama

### *Crayola Eyes*

From childhood,  
my Crayola-trained American eyes  
recognise  
Cherry Red  
Royal Purple  
Robin's-Egg Blue  
Peachy Pink.

But here there is  
Train Ticket Lavender,  
Thambili Orange,  
Milk-Tea Brown  
which is creamier than  
Spicy Pahe<sup>1</sup> Brown.

Paddy Field Green is a favorite,  
as is Floor Polish Red.  
Poya Day Whites  
a shade crisper than  
Jasmine White.

Indian Ocean Turquoise  
endless, shimmering.  
But nothing is brighter  
than Little-Boy-School-Shorts Blue.

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1 pahe - roasted curry powder

How can I begin to understand,  
How can I allow myself to write,  
When I am just starting  
to truly see colour?

### ***Untitled***

Having lived through multiple displacements,  
she now creates rag-rugs  
using an iron push-pedal Pfaff,  
attaching the remnants  
snipped  
from overused bed-sheets  
or worn out clothes,  
meticulously organised by shade,  
then braided into multi-coloured ropes  
(for strength or beauty I cannot say).

Has she chosen this craft  
because she is so accustomed  
to creating the world  
out of scraps?

I cannot bring myself  
to wipe my feet  
on something so resilient.

### ***An Immaculate Home***

When visiting any household in Sri Lanka,  
regardless of who you are,  
or who your host is,

you will be offered a beverage,  
proffered on a delicately decorated tray.

Regardless of the surrounding heat,  
you will accept the tea.  
Regardless of how artificially sweet it is,  
you will accept the fruit juice.

In Yaka Wewa,<sup>2</sup>  
a farming village  
visited only twice a day by a CTB bus,  
as our host prepares the drinks  
we notice the floor,  
the cemented plainness  
carefully covered by vinyl sheets  
of imitation wood.

A dainty glass wind chime of dolphins  
dangles from the beam of  
the corrugated steel roof,  
clicking in the wind,  
the dolphins cavorting, as if in water.

Elsewhere on the island are  
freshly carpeted roads of velvet,  
Repainted train stations reopened.  
Here the passage of time  
is marked only by a 10-year-old girl  
in a bright pink dress,  
skipping barefoot along the dirt path.  
She who survived

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2 A border village on the border between the government and LTTE areas during the war. These villagers were constantly harassed and often killed by the LTTE. A number of their family members are still missing.

the bus destruction<sup>3</sup>.

Our host tells us of nights in the jungle  
(trees safer than walls then)  
of returning home,  
searching for belongings and men.  
Her life is defined by what has gone missing.

She offers us strawberry wafers,  
the rectangles of layered crisps and frosting  
arranged into  
a neat, orderly tower.

### ***IHBI***

While focused on others' sweat  
staining my sari jacket on  
the overcrowded evening  
Colombo commuter train,  
my phone went  
missing.

The police secretary used a  
black pen to record the  
incident in a logbook  
the heft of an  
encyclopaedia.

She switched to a blue pen for  
my demographics: name  
age, address, occupation,

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3 Kebithigollewa Bus Bombing, 2006, in which a number of villagers from Yaka Wewa were killed when their bus went over a mine placed by the LTTE.

marital status, passport number,  
religion.

Finally, a red pen for  
the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC) form  
and the International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) number  
of my phone,  
those 15 unique digits  
used to pinpoint it from  
a TRC tower.

If only we had an  
'International Human Body Identity' (IHBI)  
and the Presidential Commission  
Investigating Cases of Missing Persons<sup>4</sup>  
had their own towers.

Then the disappeared would be returned,  
and all their loved ones would need  
is a form  
covered in black, blue, and red.

***Sukhee Ramawickrama**, born and raised in North America, is currently a nursing student. She visited Sri Lanka frequently throughout childhood and spent the past year working as an English Teaching Assistant at the Ragama Medical Faculty, Department of Disability Studies. Still exploring her identity as a member of the diaspora, she is grateful to WTR for giving her the opportunity to traverse her own and others' stories through poetry.*

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4 PCIMP – Established in 2013, this commission had received more than 23,586 complaints inclusive of approximately 5,000 complaints from relatives of missing security forces personnel. The commission was disbanded in 2016 with the creation of the Office of Missing Persons.

## *Victim A*

Adilah Ismail

### *1.*

You hunch in your seat and crack your knuckles. An old habit that has stuck since you were a young child and first discovered that you could hear your joints yield to pressure with an audible pop under the flesh (*Hey, I didn't know my body could do that!*) The courtroom smells of sweat, mildewed wood, and anticipation. The jasmine perfume you spritzed on your wrists this morning has evaporated by now. Usually empty seats blossom with taut bodies and craning necks. Even the delivery boy has slipped in unnoticed, his hands dampening the brown envelopes clenched in his calloused fingers. The fans are old, wheezing above noisily, and often you have to strain to tweeze out words. Your task is made more difficult today because of the chorus of coughs, shuffles, and throat-clearing on the benches.

Your hand is stiff and has taken on a claw-like form. Your notes for the day are mangled monosyllables dancing on sheets of foolscap, and you grimace when you look at them. Unfinished notes means working late to type them out and then scrambling to catch the last bus to your boarding house. You loathe the typing and will put it off until it is unavoidable. There is already a week's backlog of records to be typed and, recalling this, your head begins to throb and you crack your knuckles again.

This case had attracted considerable attention locally but scant attention nationally, it had been reduced to a perfunctory paragraph wedged between a report about a nun winning the lottery and a dispatch about a pawn-shop being robbed. The case was - is - at odds with the country's current narrative, it grates at the post-war optimism that still lingers. It reminds people that there are still tensions, despite the absence of conflict. No one likes to be reminded of this.

"We must look towards the future. What is the point in digging up all that happened and then having all these problems surface again?" You have often heard people exclaim, cleaving the air for added emphasis. "What is the point?"

It has gone on for six years, an arduous and expensive political ping-pong game expected to culminate today. You have become acquainted with it only in the last year. Your knowledge of the law is feeble and, as hard as you try to understand, most of the verbose arguments in the courtroom trickle through your grasp. The case was a frequent lunchroom conversation topic, something people who dreaded prolonged silences in conversation would brandish like a triumphant trump card, when they had exhausted other small talk.

Victim A was 27 when it happened. Both her children were old enough to feel that some unspeakable intangible thing had shifted within their mother, but young enough not to worry about it or even remember that night. On the days victim A comes to testify, placard-waving protesters press against the gates of the courthouse. There aren't many of them, and it seems to you as though it is the same ones who always return – young women with oddly wizened faces and middle-aged men with perspiration shining through their buzz cuts. There was once a victim B but, as the years wore on, so did her resolve.

Victim B was ten years older than victim A and had five children who were old enough to remember. That humid June night six years ago, after the soldiers had left and the two half-conscious women lay on the land they had grown up on, victim B propped herself up and began vomiting. As she retched and heaved, bruises already mottling her trembling body, a warm shame began to spread and take root inside her, eclipsing the pain.

Time began to mark victim A while the case was underway. Her shoulders acquired a tight, seashell curl. With each court hearing, her voice lapsed further into a raspy hoarseness. You began to notice how she spoke slowly, often glancing at the ceiling and rolling each syllable over her tongue, as though she had to first convince herself of what she was saying. Her hair became dusted with grey and her chin began to be nudged by folds of fat that formed around her neck. She started wearing white saris last year. A coin-shaped crimson mark smeared on her sunburned forehead, the smallest punctuation of colour. On some days, her husband would accompany her. A reticent and wiry man, his drooping moustache reminded you of the bird silhouettes you would draw during art classes in school – dark elongated M's flying against vermilion sunsets.

When victim A was ushered into court for the first time last year, you were

unable to stop staring at her, often forgetting to take notes during the hearing, wondering – stupidly and a little naively – if she would be able to recognise parts of herself in you. The legal arguments may evade you but the facts of the case are marked on your memory and skin. Often you have to pause to take deep breaths while writing the details of the case notes, marvelling at how the very incident you keep running away from shadows you like a faithful, flea-ridden dog.

Victim A's description of the incident mirrors shards of your own. Only there weren't four soldiers, but one. And he wasn't a stranger but a neighbour, revered as a war hero. He charmed your family and so you kept silent, doubting if your words could withstand the brunt of his denial. You were 14. When he died in combat three years later, you went to his funeral and watched dully as your mother wept and as his sobbing mother stroked his waxen cheek. You watched as your dazed father hovered near the casket in mute disbelief, and all you could think of was *enough, enough, enough*.

## 2.

The defence is led by a thin-lipped, thick-waisted man who doesn't exude power, but has the comfortable air of someone who is always surrounded by it. Victim A's counsel is an earnest but nervous man, with a faint look of astonishment fixed on his face throughout the months – as though he can't quite believe he is invited to the party.

In the crowded courtroom today, the three soldiers sit together in the defendant's cage at the back. Shoulders hunched, they are dressed in shirts and trousers of shadowy, indiscernible colours. One of them has an enviable crease galloping through each leg of his nylon trouser, the kind that always eluded you when ironing your father's trousers. Perhaps his wife had ironed it for him, faithfully delivering it to him in remand prison, just in time for today's hearing.

Another, perhaps in a bid to look respectable, has applied liberal amounts of hair gel. Unnecessary, since his cropped hair already hugs his scalp in a fierce embrace. It congeals into dull clumps as the morning wears on and now glistens under the glare of fluorescent tube lights. The third soldier has a defiant tilt to

his chin that marks him from the others, his face tightens into taut lines of anger. There was once a fourth soldier but, as the years wore on, so did his resolve. One night a few years ago, he clambered aboard a crowded boat clutching a passport with crisp pages and an unfamiliar name that must have felt like an ill-fitting prosthetic.

When you first glimpsed the anger pulsing on the third soldier's face a year ago, you missed a beat in your writing and fumbled, cheeks dissolving into pools of pink. A familiar dread, which you manage to stifle on most days, rose like sour bile in your throat. Sometimes you would look up from a long period of writing, prickling with uneasiness, to feel his gaze on you and you would quickly cover your neck with the pallu of your sari. You've met men like the third soldier before. He is not uncommon. Men fermenting with dangerous masculinity, easily aggrieved. Men like this during war are far more dangerous than the weapons they are armed with. Men like this during peace are like landmines studded under the soil, invisible but ready to explode at the gentlest of movements, setting ablaze everything around them.

After the closing arguments, the judge retires to his chambers to deliberate. He is a man of habit and slow deliberation. You haven't been at the courts for long but you already know the judge's rituals. During commercial cases, his fingers are stained with the neon-coloured ink leaking from the highlighters he uses, nose buried in case files, as he underlines paragraphs.

For criminal cases, he installs himself in his chambers, downing cup after cup of sweetened tea, as if the dregs at the bottom of the cup contained the answers to the questions of fairness and justice. When he reaches a decision, he prays at the miniature altar near his desk, to statues of pint-sized, gilded gods that could fit snugly in his palm. Then, he barks out instructions to the peon to clear away the teacups. The peon, his chest swelling with pride at his part in the deliberations, hisses at the office boy to nudge the dozing security guards out of the heat-induced stupor that grips them on most afternoons. Fortified by sugar and blessings from the deities, the judge then strides into the courtroom to take his seat at the bench.

The courtroom is full and you feel claustrophobic. There's no sign of court reconvening yet, so you slip out of the sweltering courtroom and make your way along the corridor. You bump into the peon who is scuttling through the

corridor in consternation. The judge is nowhere to be found, he announces to you, floored by this fissure in a sanctified ritual.

### 3.

To work in the legal field of this country requires a coping mechanism. The judge's most recent coping mechanism is walking. His cholesterol is high thanks to the creamy coconut milk (first extract) his new domestic assiduously spoons into all curries. These days, his shirt chafes against his belly uncomfortably. Thrice a week he sets off to the town's new walking track – an arbitrarily planned affair hurriedly built, where walkers have to sidestep slumbering cows and fresh cow dung – in an effort to assuage his conscience that he is doing his part to counter the coconut cream. But also with a vague awareness that, symbolically, the walks denote a demarcation between work and home: A shift between two spheres that he doesn't want overlapping.

You, on the other hand, take refuge in movies with elaborate song and dance sequences and cherubic actors. Once in two weeks, you make your way to one of the town's many DVD stores. You glide your hands over the plastic covers of the pirated copies of the latest Bollywood movies, reading the blurbs at the back and scrutinising the cast carefully before taking your pick for the week.

You've perfected the wispy quality of being present but not really being present and it has served you well most of the time. Puberty left you with a constellation of acne and love handles jutting gently over your waist. That incident with the solider erased the outsized curiosity that had marked you as a child. "She's become a photocopied version of herself," an aunt once remarked with characteristic bluntness, surveying you on your twenty-first birthday. Your family saw the transformation as a usual passage through adolescence to adulthood, and your father was privately relieved. But sometimes, you caught your mother looking at you with a quizzical expression as though she was biting down questions she was afraid of getting answers to.

You are liked in the courthouse. They think you are a bit on the quiet side and slow to catch on to jokes, but that's alright, you aren't looking to make friends here anyway. You never interrupt the clerks' soliloquies and they know

they have a captive audience in you. In the crowded canteen, which contains the odours of old meals, you always eat your dinner leftovers for lunch, usually unnoticed, and unburdened with the trappings of small talk.

If one walks beyond the back exit of the court-house, one comes across a hillock with a cement bench, hidden from the building by a handful of scraggly bushes. A jackfruit tree twines around a coconut tree in a grim embrace, providing shade. If the peon were to pass by at this moment, he would be able to glimpse the judge turning to an old coping mechanism from his law student days, head leaning against the jack tree, eyes closed. He sighs as he exhales, a cigarette balanced between two fingers with the languid grace that smokers acquire over time. It's a cheap Gold Leaf and leaves an acrid aftertaste but it'll do for now. It'll do.

When he opens his eyes he is startled to see you standing at the bottom of the hillock. You sometimes come here when you need a breather, but he doesn't know this. For a moment you both hesitate and you are about to turn back – he is a judge, you are a stenographer– but he nods and, after some hesitance, you make your way to the cement bench and sit down at the far-end.

“For how long have you been working here?” he asks, patting his pockets for a box of matches to light another cigarette. When he leans forward to cup the flame, you notice that his bald spot has been ineffectively covered by a few strands of greying hair – a curious act of vanity at his age. His pupils have started to take on the milky, unfocused edges that herald the beginnings of cataract, and wrinkles indent the sides of his eyes – as though someone had taken a fork and pressed it against his skin, leaving deep depressions.

“One year, sir.”

“What do you make of it so far? Is this your first time at a courthouse?”

“Yes. I worked in a private company before.” You pause, trying to find the right words. “It's hard. Not the work, I'm used to all the typing. But just being there in the courtroom. Seeing the kind of people who come in and out, looking for help.”

“Flawed people trying to make the best of a flawed system. You'll get used to it.” He sighs out a cloud of smoke and for a moment you smell tea and tobacco.

“Is she here today?”

“No. The army officers are here today but I think someone from her family must be here.”

The judge shifts uncomfortably and lapses back into silence. This case has been troubling him for months now. Earlier, in his chambers, as he thumbed through precedents and pored over the case notes and evidence, he was thinking of the consequences of this case, a problematic case that was blithely passed on from one bureaucratic department to another until it landed on his desk. He must give a judgement today and he is perturbed, wondering if he has missed something, if he should withhold his decision for today, if he should deliberate more.

The judge also wonders if the three-wheeler that seems to be always parked at the end of his lane these days is just another three-wheeler and nothing more. He thinks of his only daughter, just out of university, who is at home these days. For an idle moment, he wonders whether he would have time for a walk this evening. Once the judgement is given, will those evening walks contain a frisson of fear and a wariness of strangers?

He remembers a visit by a high-level politician a few months back. Everything had been above the board, it was general genial chatter – they had known each other long before his friend had displayed any political ambition. But, just before the politician got up to leave, he casually mentioned the case. “You do what you have to do. We will never dream of interfering.” He had shrugged, dusting biscuit crumbs off his fingers. “But just remember that things are still tense. This kind of negative publicity can be bad for the government. There is good work that has been done, and it would be sad to undo it because of this one small case. But it’s your decision. We will not interfere,” he repeated nonchalantly. “You do what you have to do.”

It hasn’t rained in a while and beyond the bench is dry grass, dust, weeds. Lunch sheets and old newspapers somersault in the light breeze. You watch the polythene and paper waltz and wonder what the judge’s verdict will be later this afternoon. His eyes are closed but his shoulders are rigid.

“I didn’t know you smoked, sir.”

“I stopped after my children were born. But today I need to.”

“That’s understandable. It’s a big case.”

It is not your place to ask if he has reached a decision, so you don’t. You also, of course, won’t tell him that after you started working at the courthouse, the dreams have begun again. Dreams that make you claw at your skin leaving angry gashes in the morning. Dreams full of falling and a magenta-orange fury that stifles you and settles on your chest; dreams that summon your boarding house landlady to your door, knocking to ask if you are alright, but really wondering if she has made a mistake in taking you in. You also don’t tell him that the Piriton you used to take to blunt the dreams doesn’t work anymore.

You understand what propels victim A but, at the same time, you can also sympathise with victim B – some days memory is painful as bleach poured on broken skin.

“You should go in if you’re ready,” you announce abruptly, thinking of the crowded courtroom. “They must be waiting for you inside.”

He glances at you, surprised that you haven’t broached him for details about the case. It seems as though everyone these days has an opinion about it and is eager to get first-hand information from him. He notices that your fingernails have been chewed to half-moon stubs – even the tender skin around the nail has been bitten, leaving sunset-pink gashes. As he dusts the cigarette ash from his robes, he catches a glimpse of the scars that criss-cross your hands, souvenirs from your dreams.

“There are scars on your hands.” It’s a statement, not a question. You meet his gaze but don’t offer an explanation.

#### 4.

The screams begin just as both of you make your way back to the courts. They tear apart the membrane of afternoon inertia that has congealed over the day. You are unsure if it is a man, woman, or animal and stop in your tracks, unaware that you’re holding your breath and straining to hear more. It reaches a crescendo

and seems to be coming from near the gates. People begin shuffling out of the courtrooms, looking at each other, bemused and uncertain. Both you and the judge follow the crowd. You hear mournful howls punctuated by heaving sobs and the words “Enough. Enough. Enough,” repeated in a high-pitched staccato.

Outside in the shimmering sunlight, victim A’s husband is huddled on the ground, his face buried in the dust. An alarmed journalist with a notebook and ballpoint pen in hand is the closest. Someone whispers that a stream of tactless questions the journalist had posed – something about loss of honour, family, and children (even he can’t remember them now in the face of this breakdown) – had triggered this response from the usually stoic husband. Beads of sweat appear on the journalist’s forehead and he wets his lips nervously. He is eager to distance himself from a situation that is beyond his pay grade, but he is also compelled by a voyeuristic curiosity to stay. Even the protestors outside the gate put down their placards and watch in silence, unsure of how to proceed.

Rings of curious people ripple outwards, surrounding the husband but maintaining a wary distance. You stand in the middle of the growing circle, jostled by bystanders. It is the uninhibited visceral grief of a man past caring what others think. His sobs make something within you tighten and coil. His shirt is coated with grime, fists beating the earth – a childlike gesture, at odds with this raw adult anguish. When he raises his head, you see the dust clinging to his moustache.

Everyone stands there, a public audience to a private grief, until two portly security guards disperse the crowd and bundle the man back into the court-house, half carrying, half dragging him. A medic is called to administer treatment to the husband – as if there is any real cure for this kind of grief. The courts had seen its share of tears, ugly brawls, and spats but this eruption of animal grief is a first.

You now notice the judge standing opposite you at the edge of the inner circle. His curious gaze is not on victim A’s husband – from where he stands, he can only see the back of the husband’s dishevelled head – but on you. The judge regards you as though the husband’s grief is reflected on your face and the pain that contorts his features is contorting yours too. “He knows,” you think. “He knows about what happened.” You don’t know how he knows or what gave it away, but he knows. Your head starts throbbing again. You raise your fingers to

massage your temples and find that your cheeks are wet – you’ve been crying silently without realising it. The judge quickly detaches himself from the crowd and retreats into the building.

You wipe your face discreetly with the edge of your pallu and slip back into the courtroom, taking your seat and making sure your files are in order.

The judge stops at his chambers and gulps a cup of tea the peon has thoughtfully left on his desk. He pauses at the altar to offer a quick prayer and then strides into the courtroom to take his seat at the bench.

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## *Nothing to Offer but Her Tears*

Tharshini Vignarajah

“Thank God,” she sighed as the plane came to a stop on the runway. They were finally free from this thirteen-hour flight from London. Passengers were standing up to get their hand luggage and struggle out of coats. It was around 6:00 a.m. Kiritha, looking through the window, could see a clear morning, the sky a vivid blue, flecked with a few clouds. Hard to imagine there had been 30 years of war here.

Once she went down the steps from the plane, Kiritha stood, her eyes closed momentarily, breathing in the sea-salt odour of the island. “Twenty years,” she thought and sighed. She felt like she was floating above herself. Passengers began to jostle past her and she collected herself and walked down towards the terminal. This was the first journey she had ever undertaken alone. She thought for a moment of her two daughters back in London and her hand moved instinctively to the chain she was wearing. She gripped the locket they had presented her with the day before. She longed for her daughters to be here with her, longed to see their reaction to a country they had never seen. She missed her husband too; wished he was here to take care of things for her, to find and carry her luggage or arrange a porter. She felt small and frightened as if she was a little girl again at a new school.

Kiritha had to spend a day in Colombo before beginning her trip North to her hometown. Twenty years had paved the way for much development in the country. As she walked the streets, she marvelled at how the city, and the country, had changed; she marvelled at the tall glass buildings, the flyovers, the massive apartment blocks, and ostentatious mansions. “Time’s winged chariot has been running fast here,” she thought to herself, an edge of bitterness to her thoughts. All these positive changes were in the Sinhalese parts of the country.

The reason she couldn’t bring her daughters, the reason she was travelling alone, was because she was going to Puthukkudiyiruppu where she had lived all her life, before leaving the country. In her time, it had been an unimportant

town, but now it was famous because the last phase of the war had been fought there. Her mind returned to her two daughters, Shanthy and Suba. Even though they wanted very much to visit Sri Lanka and see their grandfather and their mother's home, she had been too frightened to bring them.

Whenever Kiritha's parents wrote letters to her, she always asked her daughters to read them to her as a way to improve and make practical use of the Tamil they learned in private classes. She also wanted her children to know about her parents' feelings towards their daughter's family. Suba always volunteered to write a reply to her grandparents, to post it along with Kiritha's own reply. These letters from her parents sometimes had photographs in them, and so her daughters had a visual sense of their grandparents' home and neighbourhood. With these photographs, it was easier for them to imagine the stories Kiritha told them about her childhood. Whenever Kiritha saw Sri Lanka was on the news, she called her daughters to show them her country. One day, the news was about a bomb blast at a school that was occupied by displaced people.

"What's that place, ma?" her younger one asked.

"It's a school," Kiritha replied without taking her eyes off the TV.

Dead bodies were scattered everywhere. Branches of a banyan tree had fallen on the ground, limbs and bloody clothes mangled among the debris. Young boys were lifting up injured people and carrying them away, while people rushed about trying to find their relatives. A mother sat silently with her dead child in her lap.

"Terrible," Suba murmured and closed her eyes.

Shanthy just stared at the television. "Sri Lanka is a dangerous country to live in," she finally declared, as if she was just discovering this.

As the last phase of the war commenced, Kiritha and her husband Santhan, seeing that Puthukkudiyiruppu was right in the middle of it all, were distraught with fear. Whenever Santhan met his friends he talked with them about the war in Sri Lanka, getting whatever news they had from their relatives there. Kiritha and Santhan went to a few protests that called on Western governments to intervene.

Then, one day, the war was over. Just like that. Meanwhile, Kiritha had not heard from her parents for a month. She passed from terror to depression to numbness as she went about her regular life in London. Finally, one Friday morning, her father called on a terrible spluttering line from Sri Lanka. He told her that her mother had died in a cluster shell bombing. A month had passed since her death, but he was only calling now because, during the last stretch of the war, he had been displaced and been in a camp. She could not believe her ears. She leaned against the wall by the telephone, tears running down her cheeks. Her daughters were eating their breakfast in the kitchen and, when they saw their mother's state, they rushed to her, asking what happened but she was speechless.

“Appaa!” Shanthy cried.

Santhan came running into the kitchen. Kiritha was crouched on the floor by now, sobbing desperately.

“Kiritha!” He crouched next to her. “What has happened?”

She still couldn't respond and their daughters chimed in saying, “Appa, Amma got a call just now and started to cry. We don't know who called.”

“Who called Kiritha?” Santhan asked gently, taking her hand.

“Appa...” Her voice cracked.

Santhan, guessing the news, put his arms around her and asked gently, “What happened?”

“Amma...!” She started to sob again. Her daughters came and sat with her. They had never seen their mother weep like this before. Shanthy took Kiritha's shaking hand and stroked it gently, her eyes also full of tears.

Kiritha finally became silent, staring ahead. “I have to go, Santhan,” she said after a moment.

“Amma, please! Don't go there!” her daughters cried.

Seeing their fear, she gained control of herself and hugged them. Then she began to weep all over again to think that her daughters had a mother to call ‘Amma’ but she would never call anyone “Amma” again. The war had forced her to swallow that precious word forever.

As the days passed, Kiritha grew even more determined to return and see her father before he too died. She could not allow that to happen without seeing him. She finally told her daughters of her decision. Suba and Shanthy were sitting on the sofa when she spoke to them and they scowled at her, angry that she was determined to make this journey.

Kiritha knew that her daughters were not mature enough to understand her situation and feelings. She was tired of working in a Western country. Both she and Santhan had to work so hard and had to be so vigilant about their daughters' future – to protect them from the negative aspects of Western culture. Kiritha, in the past, had argued many times with Santhan about going back to visit their homeland, but Santhan wouldn't agree to this because he could never return.

Her husband was suspected of being the mastermind behind a bomb blast in Trincomalee, in 1990. He was innocent of this charge, but they had to leave their country because they were frightened he would be taken in by the Sri Lankan army and tortured. Whenever she argued with him about going back, she saw the fear in his eyes. He wasn't about to let her and the two girls go unprotected, without him.

With this telephone call from her father, though, Kiritha was no longer willing to oblige her husband on this. When she told Santhan of her decision to return, that she had actually bought her ticket, he was furious. But she wouldn't budge. "I should never have stayed away this long. Now, Appa is alone. I have to go to him now," she cried angrily.

"Don't behave like an idiot, Kiritha! It's far too dangerous to go back now. There's a military state up there. The army is still taking in people and many have disappeared. It's not safe for any woman, even one coming from abroad." Santhan picked up a vase and looked like he was going to fling it on the ground, but then controlled himself and put it back on the dresser.

"Please support me in going, please don't block me," Kiritha replied weeping.

"Try to understand me," he begged. "The situation there is not good after the war ended. I won't allow you to go now."

"I couldn't bear it if I received a call from Sri Lanka telling me my father had also died," she cried.

Santhan stared at her for a moment. Then he began to pace up and down. Finally, he stopped. “Okay. But the children can’t come with you.”

“They have to come with me because I am their mother.”

Santhan walked to the window and stared at the sky. It was as empty as the trees in this autumn landscape. His hunched shoulders signalled his refusal to send the girls. After a while, he turned to her worried. “Why would you even think they could go? You are not yourself, Kiritha, this is my biggest worry. You would have never suggested such a dangerous thing for our daughters before.”

Kiritha hung her head, now ashamed she had actually thought of taking her daughters. What had she been thinking?

That night, she lay awake for hours terrified and sad about leaving her daughters and her husband. “What if something happens to me?” she thought. “What if I never see them again?” She shuddered to think of her daughters too having to swallow the word “Amma” forever. But, still, she had to go. The compulsion to return was too great. There were some things one had to do, in order to keep living. A life without ever seeing her father again was unbearable, unimaginable.



The fully air conditioned van was moving fast along the A9. Despite the destruction around her, Kiritha was able to tell that they were passing Mankulam. The journey was comfortable because of the carpeted road, but Kiritha’s emotions jolted about. One moment she was happy to be soon seeing her father after 20 years, eager to visit her childhood home. The next moment she would think of her dead mother and her brother, who had gone missing some years ago, and she would be pierced with sorrow. All the while, she was taking in the destruction around her, the scores of huts with tin sheet roofs, the headless palmyra and coconut trees.

When the van reduced its speed at a junction, Kiritha peered out, trying to determine what town or village this was. All she could see were some shops without signboards.

“Where are we now?” She felt sad at having to even ask the question. This should be a familiar place to her.

“It’s Paranthan, akka” the driver replied.

“Paranthan...?” she murmured in disbelief. There were only a few people here and there, a few small huts in this barren landscape. All the fertile fields lay uncultivated and rutted. The road was very quiet with only one or two vehicles. It felt like a holiday or a Sunday to Kiritha. “Thambi,” she asked the driver hopefully, “Is there a strike today? Why are the shops closed today?”

“No akka, there isn’t a strike. They haven’t opened the shops because all the people are in camps. The Army hasn’t cleared the mines in this area.”

The van picked up speed. Her thoughts went faster than the van. She thought of her home, her village. The word “mines” troubled her. Would there be mines around her home too? If anything happened to her, what would her daughters do? It was even more unsafe here than she had expected.

She came out of her thoughts when her water bottle fell on her feet, as the vehicle slowed down. The van was crossing a bridge that was under construction. She closed her eyes and leaned back on the seat tired for a moment. When she next looked out, they were passing paddy fields that were empty, only weeds growing in them. “Emptiness,” the word echoed in her ears. She looked at the fields again. They reminded her of her father and his fields. “He must have been happy when I was born” she thought, “Because he would have thought I’d look after them in their old age.” She felt tears in her eyes. It pained her to think what her father must be feeling, left alone by everyone, even his wife. “Almost all Sri Lankan people are affected by this war in some way,” she thought. She was not alone in her sorrow. Lulled by this thought, she fell asleep, exhausted.

Someone was speaking Sinhala. She opened her eyes quickly, frightened. The van had stopped at a checkpoint, beyond it, the Army camp. A soldier was by the driver’s window, talking to him. She couldn’t understand what they were saying but, after a brief exchange, the driver got down and, accompanied by the soldier, went towards another soldier who was sitting at a table not far away in an open shed. She watched that soldier examining the driver’s papers and recording something in a book. She looked around. The surrounding area was neatly maintained and there were many flowering plants along the camp’s wall.

The army officers at the checkpoint were very young and seemed innocent. “Are these the people who killed all those young LTTE soldiers when they went to surrender?” she wondered as she stared at them. “Are they the people who humiliated our young girls during and after the war?”

Once his details were recorded, the driver returned with a smile to the van. She could not figure out the meaning of his smile. They set off again. The sun was shining and it was around two o’ clock. As it was August, there was no rain and the land was dry. Trees were starting to shed their foliage along the roadside. “If my daughters were with me, I could have told them that this is our autumn,” she thought. She felt some hope when she looked at the leafless trees. “Like the trees, the people also have lost everything because of the war but, like the trees, they are still alive,” she thought. She wished she could help her people, but she was the mother of two children and lived in London, so she was unable to serve the people.

At one point, the driver stopped the van under a tree and pointed. She looked in the direction he was pointing, astonished, but could not figure out what this place was. The landscape was filled with vehicles. Bicycles were gathered in a separate place, piled up in a large hillock. Vans, buses, motorcycles, lorries, tractors, three-wheelers, were jammed up tight in these vast fields. Most of the vehicles were in terrible condition, many of them burned out shells. “What is this?” she asked in awe. He explained that these vehicles had been left by people during the last phase of the war as they travelled towards the coast. The Army had gathered the vehicles here. This landscape of vehicles gave one a sense of the wealth of the people who had fled eastwards to meet their fate near Puthukkudiyiruppu. “Who knows whether the owners of these are alive or not,” said the driver. They exchanged a glance, knowing what the answer probably was. The vehicles were like forlorn dogs waiting for their masters. She captured the image with her camera.

The van reached the Puthukkudiyiruppu junction at about three thirty. The driver, who knew by now of her history, indicated a building ahead and said, “It’s your primary school, akka. Can you recognise it?” She knew this had to be her school because it was near a junction, but most of the other huge buildings were not there. Only two remained, riddled with bullet holes, entire sections of their roofs missing. She asked the driver to stop the van in front of the school

and she got out, looking at the piles of rubble where the other buildings had been. The big Neem tree was still there and, once she came through the gates, she found a teacher and some students under the tree. She stood some distance from them, unnoticed, remembering how she used to play hopscotch with her friend Jayanthi under the tree during the interval. Jayanthi. She sighed. Jayanthi had been her best friend. They had been in school together since they were 6 years old.

They had lived in the same village, so they went to school together and returned together. Their schoolmates called them twin sisters. One day, there had been a meeting of the students called by the LTTEs. She had been 18 years old then. Later, as they walked home, Kiritha found that Jayanthi, fired up by the LTTE's rhetoric, had decided to join them. Kiritha begged her friend to give up such a mad idea, but Jayanthi would not listen. The following day Kiritha waited for Jayanthi at her gate but she didn't come. Later, when she finally got to school, she learnt that Jayanthi had left to begin her training. After that, Kiritha found it very difficult to concentrate on her studies, constantly thinking of Jayanthi's well-being. She finally stopped her studies, even though her parents and teachers begged her to continue. Her parents were frightened to force her, thinking she would also follow her friend. Finally, Kiritha's father's friend, Sabaratnam who lived in London, asked him to send Kiritha to England.

"Akka." The driver had come looking for her, keen to finish this hire. Her throat heavy with sorrow, she followed him out. "You can come and visit the school another day, akka," he assured her. "Many people who come from abroad to visit family here, also visit the school and meet the principal. If you like, tell me. I can bring you here."

As they set off again, she thought that soon she would be looking up her childhood friends – those who had survived. Most of the families around here were headed by widows. Most of the children were orphans. Almost all the houses were damaged. "There's a lot to do around here," she thought.

When the van took a turn into a lane, she felt frightened. Her heart began to thump in her chest. The van stopped in front of a familiar blue gate. She got down from the van. In her haste, her handbag, which contained her passport, money and cards, fell to the ground. Leaving her belongings where they had

fallen, she ran towards the gate. It was not locked. She pushed the gate and went in.

“Appaa...” Her cry carried all the pain of her 20-year exile, the pain of her changed father and home. For there he stood, emaciated, his hair fully grey, the home behind him riddled with bullets, its roof missing tiles.

“Kiritha! You have finally come to see me...” Her father’s voice trailed off, unable to speak.

She hugged her father and he caressed her head. She had nothing to offer him except her tears.

**Glossary:**

*Akka – elder sister*

*Thambi – younger brother*

*Puthukkudiyiruppu – A town in the Mullaitivu district*

*Tharshini Vignarajah was born and bred in Jaffna, She has experienced war since her childhood. She likes to express her feelings in words.*

## *Help*

Sandeep Chamodya

“Back to the office, sir?” The driver asks, looking at Kamal through the rear-view mirror.

“Yes, yes,” Kamal murmurs into the phone, nodding at the driver.

The jeep shudders to life and heads back to the office in Pallai. The roads are supposed to be invaded by the LTTE after 6:00 p.m. and the driver knows this, but Kamal has spent a lot of time in Mirisuvil discussing the problems of the villagers and promising them all sorts of necessary help. He is a man who can make the common folks dwell in dreamland, at least until the next election.

The drive is taking more time than he had planned, despite the jeep going at a fast pace.

“Look! I don’t care how many Tamils die, they’re all just terrorists anyway. You can’t say who’s right or who’s wrong.” Kamal says into his phone while taking out an *ulundu vade* he had bought from the Siva Hotel where they had last stopped to dine.

“What do you mean army decisions?” Kamal exclaims, taking large bites from the *vade* like a starving pig. His fat body is the perfect caricature of a useless politician’s. “The army can’t decide how to fight. The government decides how to fight, no arguments. Tell them to strike. I don’t care. It’s the government order anyway.” Kamal doesn’t want the war to end. To him, the war is a well of golden opportunity.

He has always hated anyone who is not from his race or religion. In his school days, he used to pick on Tamil or Muslim kids or sometimes even Sinhala kids. The Principal had to call Kamal’s wealthy business dad and complain about his son’s behaviour almost daily. But the father would just light another cigarette, smile, and say, “My son is a naughty little hero, isn’t he?” He never punished or even advised his son.

Now Kamal looks at his golden watch, an extremely expensive piece of gadgetry. His wife bought it on the day he was first elected to the Councils. It makes him think of why he has come to this hell zone. The words of his friend, who is also a politician serving in the North, come back to him: “The North may look an inferno to others but, trust me, you can make big bucks here. All the weapons, the food and the medicine going North, all of it goes through us. You know what that means, right?” His friend smirked, “Tell me something you can’t get a profit out of, by selling it in the North.”

His friend was right. Kamal has been reaping his gold for years, through all the pain and loss of people in the North.

Kamal taps some buttons on his phone. He doesn’t like that darkness is falling outside the speeding jeep. He picks up his phone again, “Hey, did you get the new rifle stock we ordered? Release them from the port and tell me. Our party leader is getting ten percent from this deal and so that means big bucks for us. The more bullets they waste, the more cash we get.”

He peeks out the window, after ending the call, and sees, as the jeep speeds by, flashes of the thick dry forest on either side of the damaged road, looming in the dusk.

“You idiot! Why are we still on this road? We are supposed to be in Pallai right now.”

“But sir... you were...”

Kamal doesn’t let the driver respond. He shouts, “Stop talking and drive faster!”

The driver increases his speed. It’s already quarter to seven and the jeep’s headlights are the only illumination. Suddenly, there is a loud bang.

“Oh shit, did we just pop a tire? Oh my God, you are so stupi-”

That is all Kamal can say, before there is another bang followed by a large boom and, the next instant, the jeep swerves off the road into the forest, the driver’s bloody corpse hangs on to the steering wheel, his foot pressed to the accelerator. By some instinct, Kamal pushes open his door and leaps out of the jeep. The force of his exit sends him rolling, and he glimpses his vehicle rushing

towards a tree before he himself strikes a bush. The jeep hits the tree with a loud clattering of metal and glass, the engine still revving. There is a moment of shocked silence as if the forest itself is pausing to consider what has happened. A team of men in camo jackets come out of the jungle. When they see the jeep, they lift their rifles and shoot at it. Kamal crawls away, the threat of death in his throat.

The stones and sticks on the rough ground are agony. His own weight is almost too much for him to handle. Loud gunshots ring in his ears before, finally, there is a boom behind him. He only moves a few more metres before he feels a hard thud on the back of his head. He tries to look at who is hitting him but a bright light makes him blind.

“Who the fuck are you?” a voice asks in Tamil. He is in the hands of the terrorists, he’s done for.

“Don’t shoot, I am a UN officer, a UN officer,” he cries in his poor Tamil. He knows that revealing the fact that he is a government politician would mean immediate death.

“Turn off that light, they will see us,” another man whispers in Tamil and the light is switched off. Kamal can now see the men. He was expecting LTTE soldiers in camo jackets and heavy weapons, but it is just three middle-aged men in sarongs.

“Don’t worry sir, we are just villagers,” one of them says, seeming to read Kamal’s mind. “Please get up.”

Glad that he knows a bit of Tamil, Kamal gets up. His shirt is torn and his chest and arms are bruised. He ransacks his pockets for the cell phone. It is lost. He is able to walk and he follows them through the forest to a clearing where he finds more people including women and children, huddled together like a bunch of scared kittens.

“Why are you in the forest?” Kamal asks. According to his knowledge, only the LTTE stays inside the forest. These bastards must be lying to him, they must be terrorists. The fact that they speak Tamil confirms this.

“The LTTE comes into the village at night; we hide here every night. Plus there are the airstrikes and mortars. God knows when we will be buried alive

inside our own houses,” one of them says. He is a tall dark man with a white moustache.

Kamal has been sent here from Colombo just for a few weeks, to co-ordinate various logistics between the army and the government. He had never heard that civilians fled to the forests for safety.

“So, you’re leaving in the morning?” Kamal asks. He is tired and dizzy. He wants to rest.

“Yes, we hope so,” the villager says.

Kamal’s torn shirt isn’t much help in keeping away the cold, so he borrows an old shirt from one of the villagers. He sees women cuddling their children; some children are fast asleep yet their mothers are not. The mosquitos sing their symphonies and their bites are endless. He can’t believe that people can actually sit and sleep on the bare soil. He has never slept on the ground and he could have never imagined it was possible to do so in conditions like this. He has no mat or sheet to lie on, so he just rests under a large tree.

Next to him, a little child is trying to write something in a worn-out book. The moonlight is not much help, so she has her eyes close to the pages. Kamal peers over her shoulder to see what she is writing. It is some sums in bad handwriting. He realises, with surprise, that she is doing her homework. Kamal now notices she is writing with great difficulty using her left hand.

“Hey... um why don’t you try writing with your right hand?” Kamal asks while showing her his right hand.

The girl looks at him, nods, and turns her right side to him. The girl’s right blouse sleeve is empty. Devastation rocks through him.

“I should take a walk,” he gets up and starts hurrying through the people.

He is surprised to see how safe this clearing is. It is surrounded by thick thorny bushes and large tree branches that have been piled around the clearing. It looks like these people have been using this spot for a long time as their hiding place. He knew about the bunkers and dugouts they made in the army, but this is his first time seeing how civilians make their own fortifications.

Three weeks ago, he was in an air conditioned room with a comfortable bed in Colombo, but today he is in a war-affected area and he has to spend this night in fear. He remembers how his jeep crashed, the dead driver and the shooting terrorists, and he feels a cold chill running down his spine. What if they come here? What if they find me? He has never been so afraid in his life; he can smell fear and death in the foul northern breeze.

He remembers how he called some army officers cowards because they ran away from their camp after heavy attacks. He had believed that, since the soldiers had weapons, they should never be afraid. But today he is experiencing the real thing; he has learned the meaning of death. He thinks of how he loved the war when he was in his office in Colombo. All the weapon imports are making big bucks and his pockets are growing fat. He recalls also how the chastised soldiers looked. They were young and defenceless. They looked like little boys deprived of everything. When he shouted at them and called them cowards, their shoulders sank even lower and they kept their eyes on the ground. But today he is experiencing the real thing; he knows the real meaning of death today. Just the blowing of the wind is enough to make Kamal wet himself.



“Hello, sir,” Kamal wakes to see the man with the white moustache from the previous day. “It’s early morning and we can go now. Would you like something to eat or perhaps drink before you go?”

Kamal is starving, he could eat anything right now. The man brings a cup of tea and a piece of cake. The cake is made of bits of bread and other leftovers, but Kamal wolfs it down.

“So why don’t you folks carry some weapons or something? For protection?” Kamal asks while sipping his tea. The two men look at each other.

“Sir, you are a UN officer. You have been in the war, you know we cannot fight with such a force. We are just innocent farmers. They come in large groups, so the only thing we can do is either run away or die...”

“But you get protection from the government, right?”

“Oh ... ha ha,” the man grins. “This is a war, sir. As you can see, we cannot take sides. We cannot fight for the government or the LTTE. All we can do is protect ourselves and run. All those politicians who say they want to protect us, they just want to protect their fancy position in the parliament. They never give a shit about us.”

Kamal sees the rage in the man’s eye and feels as if the man has struck his face. All those speeches he made in parliament about how rural villages were being protected in the war zone. Kamal bends over his tea, so the man can’t see his eyes.

“But you trust our government... I mean you trust this government right?” Kamal asks.

“Look sir, we are poor, helpless villagers trying to get out of this hell. We don’t care about politics, and this war runs on politics. Little children, women, and men die because of these politics and politicians. They are the fuel for this war.”

Kamal feels torn. One side of his mind admits to all the political corruption he has committed, while the other side is busy justifying it.

“Sir, we can leave now,” the man says.

Kamal smiles a genuine smile, a smile of freedom. He gets up quickly, he wants to get out of this place as soon as possible; he’s feeling all the sins he’s committed crashing down on his head. The villagers are already moving out of the forest. Kamal is eager to be gone too.

“Walk all the way down the gravel road and you will come to an army camp. Here are some biscuits and some water sir, I hope you are alright.” The man hands him a packet of biscuits and a water bottle.

“I am alright. Thank you, thank you very much for saving me. I really appreciate it.” He gives all the villagers a grateful smile.

“It’s nothing sir. Come, we will show you the way.”

The man with the white moustache leads him through the forest and soon they come to the main road.

“Walk this way and you will be safe.” The man points to his right.

“Thank you again,” Kamal say and with a nod begins to walk away.

“Umm sir...” Kamal hears the man calling after him. He spins around. “You are a UN activist right?”

“Yes, why?” Kamal tries to keep his face neutral.

“Can you please end this war sir, that’s all I ask.” The man’s face is sad, resigned. “We are the people getting hurt by all this fighting, sir, there is no future for us at all. It’s not the fault of anyone but the government and the politicians. They are the ones who are killing us, killing our children...”

Kamal nods, turns and walks away, along the dusty road, into safety. Already his mind has drifted to his next deal, his next profit. He walks jauntily along, towards the army camp.

*Sandeep Chamodya is a student from Richmond College, Galle. He is interested in writing because he was inspired by other good writers around the globe. He is against racism and the political influence on war and violence.*

## *A Place to Call Home*

Caitlin Giles

When my Seeya was first admitted to a long-term care facility in a suburb of Toronto, I realised how little I really knew about him. He was a quiet man even before his Alzheimer diagnosis. Growing up, I never really cared to poke and prod him with questions, but his sickness triggered something. As I slowly watched the memories fading within him, his mortality became a reality for me and I had a gripping fear that all the stories would disappear along with him.

I made it my mission to squeeze out as much information from him as I could, while I could. Some days his stories were clear, and other times they were mixed and muddled. When I visited with my Atcha, she helped trigger his memory, or correct him when his mind wandered. One of the stories I was able to pry from him, and perhaps one of the clearest, was of their move to Canada. He told me this on a cold, winter day, seated on a worn leather chair at the Home, both of us looking out the window as the snow fell on the houses across the street. My grandmother had left me alone with him, so she could run an errand. As he spoke, his words transported me to another time, to their life in a place where the sun was burning hot and the trees were a lush green.

At that time in their lives, my Seeya, Rohan, and my Atcha, Sriyani, lived in a concrete house with red floors and a terracotta roof. Coconut, mango and jackfruit trees dotted the front yard, and a rusted metal gate and dusty boundary wall separated the compound from the busy street.

That day my Seeya and Atcha were having an argument. He sat at the kitchen table as Atcha moved around preparing a meal. “No,” he finally cried, running his hand through his short, coarse hair, exasperated. He picked up the *Daily News* to indicate that the discussion was over.

“Baba,” Atcha said, ignoring his finality. She pulled a bubbling pot of rice off the stove. “It isn’t safe here anymore.” Her sari swept the ground as she did her usual dance between the spices, coconut, and chopped up onions. Her thick hair was tied in a neat kondai on top of her head.

“Our life is *here*, in Colombo, Sriyani.”

My Seeya looked at the newspaper. ‘13 Killed in Ambush’ was the headline.

“I know we have a life here, but what if something happens?” Atcha spooned rice from the pot onto a round plate, smoothing it out as she spoke. “You take the bus every day and I never know if you will come back. Look,” she said, pointing to the newspaper, “the violence is spreading. It’s going to get worse.”

She put a fresh batch of kiribath in front of him, the steaming smell of coconut milk filling his nose, the smell of home.

“Where would we go?” he asked. His eyes, the colour of tea when the leaves had been left in too long, were sombre and pensive as he looked at the newspaper, not really reading it anymore. His square jawline was tense, making the angles appear even sharper. At 33, crow’s feet had already started to appear in the corners of his eyes.

“What about the kids and my job?” he added making a gesture towards the photograph of their two daughters, aged 7 and 9.

“Baba, you know I have family in Toronto. You could get a good job at a bank there. My family will let us stay with them until we find our own place. They will help take care of the kids if I need help.”

He took a piece of the kiribath and chewed it slowly, appreciating the smooth, milky texture that she always achieved with the dish. If there was anything that could change his mood, it was his wife’s cooking. His face relaxed and he smiled lovingly at her. “Mmmm, this is delicious, Sri. My favourite.”

“You say that every time, Baba.” Hitting him playfully on the shoulder, she went back to stirring the rest of the kiribath on the stove, quietly singing, *You are My Sunshine*.

He looked out of the window at the big yard – at the jackfruit trees he had grown up with, the little mango shrub he had planted. In his mind’s eye he could see his brothers and himself play-fighting out there, the storm of dust they kicked up while throwing punches at each other and creating mosquito-bite sized welts on each other’s arms. They hurt, but not as much as the whipping

they got later from their father. “Boys will be boys”, their mother would say, however much their father felt otherwise.

He was distracted from his thoughts by scuttling footsteps across the living room and the next moment their daughters Kusuma and Indira rushed into the kitchen, each racing to be the first at the table. “Good morning, Amma and Thatha,” they chimed together.

Before they could sit down, he leapt up and scooped them up with his powerful arms, smothering them against his chest, “Good morning, you rascals.”

“Good morning, my chuttis,” their mother cooed, placing a fresh batch of kiribath in front of them. She turned to her husband and whispered, “What’s it going to take to convince you?”

“I’ll think about it,” was all he replied.

She knew *‘I’ll think about it’* was just like pressing the snooze button on the alarm in the morning - delaying until its insistence burst upon him, impossible to ignore.

That morning my Seeya, Rohan, left for work promptly at 7:30 a.m., as he did every day. He kissed Indira and Kusuma on the head as they ate their breakfast and gave his wife a peck on the cheek.

“Call me when you get to work,” she said, pinching his cheek and looking seriously into his eyes.

“I will, Sri,” he said back, this time kissing her lips. He grabbed his briefcase and keys before heading out the door.

The air was hot and humid and his button-down shirt and trousers soon clung to his body like plastic wrap. It was a bit of a walk to the front gate and he often took this time to gather his thoughts about what he needed to do that day at work. Some clients needed approval on a loan and he had some paperwork to catch up on. He passed the jackfruit trees and the coconut palms, which were swaying more forcefully than normal, creating an unfamiliar rustling above him. When he reached the gate, he unravelled the long, heavy chain and heaved at the rusted metal frame, the gate whining as it opened.

The local bus was packed. Between the overcrowding and the heat, he felt like he would vomit. It didn't help that he was at the back and the bus kept swerving from side to side, ducking between cars. Suddenly, with a terrific lurch, it came to a jolting halt. Seeya lost his footing and tumbled onto the woman in front of him.

"Sorry, so sorry," he said, but before he could say anymore, there was a commotion at the door and some passengers screamed. Seeya craned his neck to see what was going on.

The door swung open and five young men clambered onto the bus carrying knives and broken bottles. One of them cried, "Nobody move," and another yelled, "Where are the Tamil dogs?" and spat on the ground.

The entire bus had gone silent, the passengers rigid in the seats and aisle. Rohan felt that now he really was going to be sick.

"All of you, open your wallets and pull out your IDs. Nobody is leaving until we've said so."

As they started to push their way through the crowd, Rohan felt his pockets. Hard metal keys, but no wallet. *Shit*, he thought. Perspiration gathered at the base of his neck like droplets on the lid of a steaming pot. *I know exactly where I left it; it's on the top of the table beside my armchair. Shit.* To his horror, he now saw that the men, as they checked the IDs, were pulling terrified Tamil passengers off the bus and leaving the Sinhalese and Muslims behind. Rohan started to feel light-headed. He clutched at a pole to try and steady himself.

"Varshini Illanganthan," snarled one of the men at a girl who was probably no older than 15. "Disgusting, get outside." He grabbed her arm and, with a knife to her chest, led her down the steps and out. The men were drawing toward the back of the bus. They yelled, spat, and threatened Tamils as they pulled them off the bus. Some were so shocked they went silently, but others resisted, screaming and begging for mercy, digging in their heels and clutching at seats and fellow passengers as they were dragged from the bus. Ten people were now outside, kneeling at the side of the road. A little ahead of Rohan, a dark-skinned mother, curvy with a baby on her hip was quietly pleading to remain on the bus. "Please sir, I have two other children at home," she whispered. "My husband needs my help. He can't work and support them as well. Please sir, just let me go." Though

she softly bounced the child, it wailed with fear. Rivulets of sweat made their way down Rohan's back.

I don't care about you or your family, you filthy Tamil," The woman's aggressor cried. "You think your reasons are going to make me want to spare your life?" He grabbed her hair so that she was hunched over, screaming in pain, then he shoved her away and barked, "Get outside!" Stunned and crying, she scrambled down the stairs and out of the bus to make twelve kneeling people.

It was Rohan's turn. "You," a young man of about 20 snarled as he towered over him, "Show me your ID." The man's knife blade peaked out of his pocket like a lion crouched behind leaves in the jungle. Seeing Rohan's gaze on it, the man's fingers dusted the top of it, ready to pull out in seconds if needed.

"I...I didn't bring it with me today," Rohan replied, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Oh no?" the man asked, smirking. "Go outside."

The kneeling people now had their hands behind their head. Many were whimpering. Others were silent and numb, resigned to their fate. The men circled the Tamils hungrily.

Then Rohan remembered something. He raised a shaking hand. "Wait, uh, I have something." He turned away, propped his briefcase on top of a seat and struggled with the locks, his fingers sweaty and fumbling. Finally, he opened the briefcase. He hastily flipped through the piles of crisp white paper inside, some of them scattering across the floor.

"Get out!" the man snarled.

"No wait, please, it's right..." he rifled more frantically through the papers, panicked. "My name, it's... Here! Here! My name... Here! It's Rohan Jayasinghe. Look," he held out his last pay stub, jabbing at his name on it.

The man grabbed the pay stub, studied it for a second and said, "Wait here." He exited the bus and Rohan saw him talking to an older man, who appeared to be the ringleader. The man listened, his eyes narrowed. Though in his 30s, his hair was already thinning out and a bit of a belly hung over his waistline. He had a long, diagonal scar on his left hand, lighter than the rest of his skin.

As he watched them, Rohan could hardly breathe. The other passengers were also watching him intently. The young man finally came back on the bus.

“Take refuge in the Triple Gem,” he ordered.

Rohan recited the well-known Buddhist chant in a trembling voice.

The man nodded and thrust the paper into Rohan’s chest.

There were no more Tamils on the bus. The men left and, the moment they were gone, Rohan felt his legs give way beneath him. Another passenger nudged him and gestured to a window seat next to her, just vacated by a Tamil. He nodded his thanks and stepped over her, collapsing in the seat.

But now, through the window, he could see what was going on outside. The Tamils were being beaten, the men relishing their work, treating their victims like dirty rugs that just needed the soil kicked out of them. None of the Tamils protested or tried to get away, they were like limp rag dolls. Through the window, he could hear the grunts and cries of the victims, the occasional crack of bones. The bus rumbled to life with a jolt. It began to pull away. Rohan couldn’t stop himself from looking back, drawn by a piercing scream. They had just slit the throat of that mother. She fell on the road like a popped balloon. The crying infant had fallen from her grasp and it was wailing, lying on its side.

He didn’t go to work. Instead he got off the bus and walked home. By now the city around him was in a frenzy, the road jammed with cars, everyone desperate to get home to their loved ones, the sidewalks crowded with terrified pedestrians, the sound of distant explosions, smoke in the distance.

When he finally reached home, Sriyani was waiting on the veranda, peering anxiously towards the street.

Seeing his distraught state, she rushed down the steps to him. “Baba, what happened? I tried calling work...”

“We were held up. They asked for IDs. I left my wallet. I fortunately... I had my pay stub,” he choked out.

She took him in her arms and he collapsed against her. “It was awful, Sri. Just awful. I’m not hurt, but I just... you’re right... We can’t stay here anymore.”

I sat beside my Seeya in the silence after he had finished speaking. The upholstery of my chair was cracked and wrinkled, the colour fading. My grandmother had done her best to make this room seem like a home, but the sheets were still hospital-white and the bed, metal. Pictures of my mom, aunt, my siblings, and cousins hung on the walls - an old one of me beaming after winning first place in a figure-skating competition and a more recent one of my family with my dad - Josh, and my three younger siblings. On the bedside table was one of my Seeya and Atcha on their wedding day. My grandmother's beautiful white sari hugged her slim figure. Her head rested gently on his chest.

For a moment, I imagined my grandparents, hand in hand, swaying to the music during their first dance, dreaming of their future together forever in that ancestral home in Colombo.

I turned to look at Seeya again. He was mostly bald and the grey hair that remained was like two tufts of fur at the sides of his head. He was always a smart dresser, but now his clothes hung limply on him.

He continued his story, "And then we decided to come here."

"How, Seeya? How did you come to Canada?"

"What, Canada?" he replied after a moment, a puzzled look on his face.

"Yeah, what did you do to get here?" I asked.

His eyes glazed over and a moment of confusion came over him. "Yes, we came here. This is my home. We are in Colombo. Home." He gestured around him.

"Seeya, no, you didn't finish your story," I pleaded, realising that he was slipping away.

"Why do you demand these things of me, child?" he said, getting irritated. "I don't know what you are talking about. Sri!"

"No, shhhh, Seeya, it's ok," I whispered, caressing his arm to calm him down. This happened often when I was left alone with him, and I knew the protocol. "Atcha isn't here, but she's coming soon."

After a couple of seconds he calmed down and said in a robotic, monotone voice, "I want to go home."

Tears welled up in my eyes. My grandfather was living in a strange place, some days not knowing where he was or even who he was. I also felt sorry for myself. This was the first time I had a substantial story about my Sri Lankan heritage. Something that added to the 100-piece puzzle I was trying to put back together. I would not get much more from Seeya.

We sat in silence, unsure of what to say next. I didn't want to provoke him, so I studied the photo of my family. My mother's dark skin contrasted with the stark white of my father's. If you covered the image of my mother and looked at my sisters and me beside my dad, it would be hard to believe he was related to us. Behind the picture was a mini brass Buddha statue with some fake flowers scattered around it. I had seen a similar one in my grandparent's home. I started softly singing, *You are my Sunshine*.

This always worked the trick. Soon Seeya was singing along with me. After a while he broke off and said, "I want to go home."

I didn't reply because there was nothing to say.

*Caitlin Giles is a young professional raised by British and Sri Lankan parents in Toronto, Canada. She has a passion for languages and literature which she continues to pursue this both personally and professionally. This story explores ideas of home, family and identity. It aims to speak to those who weren't directly affected by the war, but feel the repercussions of its aftermath, across the globe.*

## *Nuwani's Resolution*

Kaveesha Fernando

### *Nuwani at 8.*

“There are some things that you must NEVER talk about, Nuwani. One is how much a person is earning. Another, much more important thing that you must never discuss, is race,” said Manthri Nanda as she bustled about the kitchen.

Nuwani listened attentively – after all, her aunt was always so wise and knowledgeable in such matters. She felt she could trust Manthri Nanda’s judgement implicitly, and so she did. Manthri Nanda had taken her in when her mother died in childbirth and her father had refused to raise her. She and Asoka Uncle were childless, and so they had treated Nuwani like their own daughter. This meant that Nuwani had a lot of wisdom imparted to her. But this latest was irrelevant. It wouldn’t be too hard for her to refrain from discussing race because she came from a completely Sinhalese background. She had very little association with Tamil people. Even her school had only Sinhala Buddhist students: about 300 of them.

The *only* person she could think of who was Tamil was Shivalingam Uncle, her Uncle Asoka’s classmate. She liked Shivalingam Uncle. She had gone to his ancestral home in Bambalapitiya a few times, where he would give her jelly beans in various flavours that he had bought on trips overseas. She particularly liked the orange ones. Manthri Nanda always said that Nuwani loved all things sour. She loved the narang juice that Nanda made. She wondered if they had narang-flavoured jelly beans. Maybe Shivalingam Uncle knew. Maybe she would ask him the next time she saw him.

But she hadn’t seen much of Shivalingam Uncle recently. This was because he was completely and openly for the LTTE. Standing in the kitchen now with her aunt, she recalled a conversation at breakfast the other day between her aunt and uncle.

“Manthri,” her uncle said worried, “Shivalingam has been warned by his office to stop supporting the LTTE. He might lose his job.”

“What?” Manthri Nanda’s face twisted with concern. “Why does he go around advertising that he supports them? Such a stupid thing, no? Does he *want* to lose his job?”

Her uncle spooned more fish curry over his string hoppers before he spoke. “I don’t think he cares. He thinks the Tigers are right, that the Tamil people have suffered and that they deserve Eelam. Now they’ll probably sack him because of it.” He passed his clean hand over his face with a weary gesture.

“What is he thinking? All this talk about their precious ‘Eelam’. Nonsense, all of it.” Her voice was shrill with concern for Shivalingam Uncle, but also anger. “The Tamils themselves have created this problem, and now they are saying they want their own country. What madness is this?”

“I don’t know what he’s thinking, Manthri. It’s wrong for him to do this.” Her uncle sighed. “I think he’s planning to leave the country.”

Nuwani stayed quiet. She knew this was grown-up talk and she didn’t ask questions. To her 8-year-old mind, it made no sense.

### *Nuwani at 12.*

After 26 years, the war was in its final stages. Nuwani noticed that everyone wanted the same thing for once – peace. From the spoilt rich kid in her elocution class to the lady in the tuck shop who would pick out her favourite orange sweets from the toffee jar, they all wanted the war to end. She went for her piano exam and, as she sat and waited for the examiner to call her in, she began talking to the girl sitting next to her. From her surname, when she introduced herself, Nuwani knew the girl was Tamil.

“What do you think of the LTTE?” Nuwani asked suddenly. It was a question she had been burning to ask a Tamil person.

The girl looked away, traced patterns on her knee, and said, “I don’t know. I guess they are evil.”

“What about our soldiers?” Nuwani couldn’t stop herself. She wanted to know what Tamil people thought.

“I guess they are good? I don’t know. They don’t seem that great though.”

Nuwani felt that there was something this girl was not saying, but she could not figure out what it was. “But they are good overall, right?” she asked hoping further questions might open the girl up.

“Maybe, I guess – I don’t know.”

It wasn’t much of an answer, but Nuwani saw that the girl wouldn’t say any more. She had to be satisfied with the answers and take it as proof that not all Tamils were traitors.

### *Nuwani at 13.*

The final stages of the war kept dragging on and on. Things were rising to a fever pitch, as everyone waited for the end. She went to her grandmother’s house, where her whole family was meeting for lunch. The talk was all about the war, the recently “liberated” cities.

“Paranthan! Killinochchi! Paranthan! Killinochchi!” she and her cousin cried as they danced around the house in glee, chanting the names of the newly freed cities.

“Silence!” shouted Manthri Nanda, coming out to the porch. “Don’t you know that people are dying over there?”

“But we’re winning! We’re killing those stupid terrorists! No more war! Paranthan! Killinochchi! Paranthan! Killinochchi!” cried her cousin. They continued dancing around the house and her aunt, giving up, went inside.

And then it was over. Prabhakaran was dead. She had never seen so many national flags flying in her life, and she was convinced that she never would see that many again. She tried to find one street, one corner of the road that didn’t have tiny flags all over. To her satisfaction, she could hardly find any. Everywhere she looked there were hordes of little rectangles, the lions within

standing proud, clutching their swords against a maroon background, and green and orange stripes on the side. The flags hung from tall buildings, decorated lamp-posts, and even fluttered from the antennae of cars. She couldn't remember ever feeling so happy.

There was, however, one house down the lane that didn't have a flag: the house of their neighbours, the Ponniahhs. Nuwani knew they were Tamil, but other Tamils had hung flags, so she wondered why this one house was not celebrating. When she asked her aunt, Manthri Nanda snapped at her saying, "Everyone doesn't need to be happy. For some people, this is a time of mourning. They've lost everything." Nuwani felt like she had been slapped. Why didn't Manthri Nanda understand that it was time for everyone to celebrate? After all, the long war in their county was finally over.

Then came the allegations. War crimes. Stupid, stupid, Western media, Nuwani thought. Those Western governments had committed so many war crimes in foreign countries. They had a nerve to harp on what happened here in Sri Lanka. Nuwani's elder cousin and surrogate sibling, Kaushalya Akki's favourite comment was the fact that the U.S. military had bombed a Palestinian preschool and called it a "training accident." Kaushalya Akki was a dark, slightly overweight engineering student who liked reading and analysing various subjects. She was often at the house and, whenever she spoke, Nuwani listened carefully. Nuwani liked her erudite personality. She knew all there was to know and Nuwani loved when she expressed her views. She wanted to be just as smart and knowledgeable as Kaushalya, when she reached her age.

"That Channel Four and Hillary Clinton, all of them are just jealous that Sri Lanka was the first country to ever defeat terrorism. There are the Asian traitors too. Like Navaneethan Pillai, that stupid Tamil woman who can't keep her nose in her own business. Coming here from the UN and criticising us," Kaushalya Akki would say. Nuwani was sure now that she understood this complex issue. Fools, all of them – trying to bring down her beloved nation.

***Nuwani at 17.***

Nuwani joined a large literature tuition class because she was doing the subject for her Advanced Level examination. For the first time in her life, she was studying with children of other ethnicities and religions. She found it a very exciting experience: Meeting new people and gaining new perspectives was something she enjoyed. She couldn't even tell who was what ethnicity based on how they looked. But she wanted to know. She started by asking what their surnames were, if they liked speaking in their mother tongue, etc. But soon she stopped asking, because it did not matter to her. She realised that their responses were of no importance to her because, Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim, they only spoke English with each other, and shared a love of Western literature and pop music. She really liked these girls, finding them more vivacious and open to the world, compared to the girls in her all-Sinhala Buddhist school.

For the first time in her life, she had a teacher who taught them about the conflict. One of the novels they read in class was titled *The Road from Elephant Pass*. The story focused on a Sinhala soldier and a female Tamil Tiger, who both survive an ambush and have to learn to depend on each other to survive, a romantic relationship developing between them. Her teacher did not shy away from teaching them the history of the ethnic conflict. Under her guidance, they learnt about the '83 riots, the JVP unrest, and the many other things that sparked and contributed to the war. This was when doubts started seeping into Nuwani's mind.

"In the North, our soldiers bombed 'no fire zones' full of civilians. Hospitals full of sick people. The government did this to innocent civilians," her teacher told them. She was Tamil, wearing a big red pottu and a salwar in class every day, her curly hair tied up or let loose in a cascade of black tresses.

"Maybe they didn't know that they were there," challenged Nuwani, unable to accept that the government, the Army, had been that brutal.

"Sweetie, they most certainly did know which areas were no fire zones. They just didn't care," her teacher said.

She might not have believed the teacher, because she who was after all, Tamil. But many of the other girls, even the Sinhalese ones, seemed to already know this and agree with the teacher. Nuwani wondered if maybe the war wasn't as black and white as she had thought. Maybe there was more to it. But still, she felt the teacher was exaggerating because she sympathised with *them*. She asked Manthri Nanda and Kaushalya Akki about what her teacher had said. Had these atrocities actually happened in the country?

"I can't believe that they are teaching all this in a tuition class. What are they thinking? They should never discuss such things," said Manthri Nanda. She wanted to pull Nuwani out of the tuition class, but Nuwani begged her aunt not to. She loved the class and her new friends. Manthri Nanda reluctantly gave in because she knew that her niece's high marks in literature were mostly due to the tuition class.

When Kaushalya visited one weekend, they went for a walk down the lane and Nuwani told her what had happened in class, saying, "But Kaushalya Akki, what if it's true? She's a nice lady. What if the war isn't as black and white as we think?"

Kaushalya twisted her lip, "Tamils will say all of that. But it was a war that *they* decided to wage and now they have lost. You can't decide to wage war and lose and then expect people to treat you with dignity. If you lose a war, you must keep quiet. There is nothing else to it."

Nuwani wasn't sure about this, but it seemed easier to accept her cousin's view than not. Soon Kaushalya's slogan was also hers: those who go on the offensive have no right to be defensive.

Around this time, Nuwani took part in a programme that promoted post-war reconciliation. The program was government-approved and so her aunt let her go. She went to Killinochchi – the very place whose liberation she had chanted about four years before. On the way, she saw bullet-ridden houses, schools and churches that were almost completely destroyed, missing walls and roofs, abandoned burnt out vehicles and even armoured cars.

Then they got to their destination, the place where the programme was to be held. It was within an Army camp. As they got down from their vehicle, Nuwani looked around and saw students from all over the island filing in and signing up to enter the camp. Some came from Colombo and looked like her in up-to-date colourful Western fashion. Other students from the rural areas and smaller cities

were more conservatively dressed, some even in their school uniforms. Then there were the Tamil students who were displaced and now living in the camp, who had also been brought here for the programme. Their clothes were ill-fitting and faded; they looked stunned and withdrawn. She noticed that the Tamil schoolgirls wore their hair differently, plaiting it and then pinning the bottom of the plait to the top to form a loop. A lot of them wore salwar kameez. These Tamil students seemed much shyer than the students from Colombo and elsewhere. But it was not just shyness, Nuwani soon saw. There was reserve, even suspicion, in their eyes. She also saw hurt.

During the opening ceremony, all participants were supposed to sing the national anthem. Nuwani noticed that the Tamil students refused to sing the national anthem in Sinhala. They stood stiffly and looked resolutely ahead. She felt suddenly ashamed and realised that singing the song exclusively in Sinhala was excluding these students.

The participants were divided into groups in a way that reminded her of the redistribution of political parties in ancient Greece that she had learned about in school. Not many people from the same area were in the same group. They played games such as tug-o-war, had art and speech competitions, and participated in random party games for the four days. Racially, all the groups were equal because they had been mixed up. Although some students only spoke either Tamil or Sinhala, they soon learnt how to communicate through sign language or facial expressions. As much as it was possible, Nuwani got to know the Tamil members of her group. She noticed that they relaxed as the days passed and, by the end, were friends with everyone.

### ***Nuwani at 18.***

Everyone was suddenly talking about the national anthem. People from the North felt that it should be sung in Tamil as well. People in the South felt that everyone belonged in one country and singing in different languages was unnecessary. Everybody had an opinion. A spokesperson for the Army, who also happened to be Nuwani's neighbour, told the media that, "In India, they

have so many different languages but they sing the national anthem in only one language, Bengali. It will be the same in Sri Lanka.”

To Nuwani, what Brigadier Fernandopulle said made sense. After all, they couldn’t sing the national anthem in several different languages. Where would they draw the line? But, at the same time, she also felt that they could maybe be a bit more inclusive.

“These Tamil people – they always want more and more. Why can’t they ever be content?” cried Manthri Nanda.

“But I saw those children in Killinochchi. At the peace summit,” Nuwani protested. “You should have been there Nanda. They looked so angry. There was pure hatred written across their faces. But they also looked so hurt and isolated. We need to help people like that. If this will help them feel like they belong, is it such a crime? They looked so lost,” said Nuwani.

“Nonsense! That’s part of the problem. They have hatred for no reason. One day it’s this, the next it’s something else. *Iitapasse kare naginna balai*. They need to learn to fit in.”

But all Nuwani could picture were the crestfallen, defensive faces of those students.

### *Nuwani at 20*

Nuwani joined an audit firm where she met Arjun, who was also an intern. They spoke in detail about the conflict and their views were quite different. He had been born and bred in Jaffna. He kept insisting that she had to watch the Channel 4 documentary before they discussed the war any further. Despite all the talk about the documentary, she had never actually seen it. So she sat down one day to watch it on her laptop. She made sure to do it at night while her uncle and aunt were asleep. She wanted to watch it in peace; she wanted to make up her own mind.

What she saw made her cry. She sobbed as she watched the horrendous suffering. She saw the mother who wept as her son videoed the bombings,

saying that he should hide instead. She saw parents losing children, wailing as they held their dead bodies. She recoiled as she watched people screaming as they tried to hide from the bombs but were left with nowhere to go. That documentary could not possibly have been doctored.

When the documentary was over, Nuwani sat on the edge of her bed for a long time, staring ahead. She couldn't believe this had happened in her own country; she couldn't understand how two different communities on one small island could be so far away in experience. She remembered with shame the way she had chanted 'Paranthan! Killinochchi!' and danced around her grandmother's house.

Nuwani decided to join another programme that invited people to speak about their experiences of the war. Titled *Speak Across*, the aim of the programme was for people from all over the island to unite and try to understand each other's beliefs about the conflict. She read a brochure about the event that Arjun gave her. After the documentary, Nuwani had felt as if she had lost her own voice, the idea of being able to express herself appealed to her immensely. Now all she had to do was break this revolutionary news to Manthri Nanda.

That day, she came home to find Manthri Nanda in a great mood, making bibikkan for an upcoming Lions Club sale. "Nuwani," her aunt said as she bustled about the kitchen, "Would you like to try some? I just finished making it."

Nuwani tasted the bibikkan and murmured in approval. Her aunt was pleased and, seizing the moment, Nuwani blurted out, "Nanda, I found a great programme to be a part of."

Her aunt turned to her, all attention now, "Really? What's that?"

Nuwani tried to hold her gaze, "It's called *Speak Across*. Takes place in Kegalle this time. They focus on uniting people who have been affected by the war and discussing social issues."

Her aunt's face was conflicted for a moment. Her hand grasped the kitchen chair in a tight hold. "Child, why do you want to do this? I don't know about these 'uniting' programmes. They can go very wrong. Politicians might disagree with the ideas expressed in them, and you know what happens then, no? Where

are you going to stay anyway? We don't know how safe this programme is. I just don't know..." Her voice trailed off.

Nuwani felt confident. The conversation had gone much more positively than she had expected. "Don't worry, Nanda," she assured her, "Two of my friends from my old tuition class, Saroja and Dinuli, are also going."

Her aunt nodded slowly as if she was willing herself to be resolved. "Okay, if you want to go, you can go. But don't come back home with too much sympathy for these Tamils." She turned back to her bibikkan.

When Nuwani told Kaushalya Akki about the programme later that night, she was regaled with a lecture about how shops in Jaffna sometimes refused to serve Sinhala people, something that Kaushalya felt showed the racism of the majority in those areas.

Nuwani wanted to scream, "Of course they don't! Can't you understand that they should be allowed at least that much after all that they have been through?" But, instead, she kept silent. Her words burrowed deep into Nuwani's heart and buried themselves there like grenades.

On the first day at the programme, she met with the group. They were from all the different communities of the island. She felt both thrilled and nervous about the conversations they were about to have. Everyone had gone through such divergent experiences in the war years, how would they ever find any common ground? The conference was moderated by famous human rights activist, Akalanka Hewage. He was involved with helping war-affected communities in the North regain stability. He asked them, "What event sparked the war in your opinion?"

A woman called Anjali Gnanaprakasam, who had been born and bred in Australia, spoke up. "I think it was the '83 riots. The Sinhalese felt that this was their country and they wanted us all gone from here." Anjali was part of the pro-Tiger movement in Australia and it was clear that she firmly believed that a separate state was necessary for Sri Lankan Tamils.

With an angry wave of her hand, Dinithi Sewwandi said, "1983 was an unfortunate event. But let's talk about what's more important. You Tamils decided that you wanted a separate state but you already have part of India –

and that's a big country. You people will chase us out of the country if you can. Our heroes fought so hard to give us freedom and now that the war is over, it's everyone's country to live in, in peace." Dinithi had grown up in the South of Sri Lanka, where there was staunch support for local politicians. She had come to the conference because she thought it would be a great way to express her opinions and convince others that the Southerner's point of view was right. She was also Nuwani's roommate and they had become very friendly.

On hearing both these women, however, Nuwani couldn't help herself. The words burst out of her mouth before she could stop them, "ENOUGH! Honestly, I can't understand you people. Why must we act like our side is the only right side? I'm Sinhalese, but I don't support everything that was done by the Sinhalese. Anjali, you're right – the '83 massacre was exactly like the Kristallnacht in Germany. But you know what was different? There were no concentration camps after that. Dinithi, please, you think that the war was fought honourably? Really? Who are we kidding here? It's everyone's country and if you can't accept that, then maybe you should leave."

Nuwani hadn't expected that Dinithi would take her comments seriously, but leave she did. When she went back to her room, Dinithi was shoving clothes into her bag furiously, her face wet with tears. Being someone who could never apologise insincerely, Nuwani was in a dilemma.

She tried her best. "Dinithi, I'm so sorry you felt hurt by what I said. I hope we won't get mad at each other over political views. We're only 20. I'm sure our views will change over time."

Dinithi looked at her with a face that was riddled with anger but also sadness. "I thought I could be your friend, but you're taking their side. You're Sinhalese but you act like one of them. How could you do that?"

It was then that Nuwani learnt a valuable life lesson – you can't be friends with everyone. This realisation left her hollow. Suddenly, the world was very lonely and she felt very small in it.



Over the next days, they witnessed and discussed many things. They watched videos about the conflict, and a former LTTE cadre came and spoke to them. He was thirty-five and he wore a cheap pink nylon shirt. Other speakers from the various sides also came and spoke to them. The final video they watched was from Nobel Peace Prize-winning writer, Naugam Shoomy. His book, *Keeping the Faith*, was a story of how an African society, adapted to harsh living conditions, still found ways to show love and generosity. The writer looked distinguished as he sat in his study. He said, “In my opinion, Sri Lanka is a beautiful land filled with much potential and promise.”

After this video, they were asked to write a story about an experience different from theirs. Nuwani wrote about a girl her age in the North. She tried to imagine what life would have been like for her. At the very end of the conference, Akalanka, their facilitator, asked them if the sessions had made them question their previous opinions.

Nisansala Jayawickrama – a schoolteacher from Kurunegala – spoke first, his voice shaking. “I didn’t realise that the people in the North faced so many issues. We never saw what they had to face on the TV. We never even imagined how hard it was for them.”

Anjali, the woman from Australia, said, “I’ve always felt that the Tigers were justified using any means necessary, but now I’m wondering if I was wrong. I’m starting to see that they hurt innocent people too.”

It was clear that seismic internal changes were happening to students from both sides.

At home, everything looked and felt different. Nuwani felt different herself, changed irrevocably. But at home, the casual, almost genial, atmosphere of intolerance towards the Tamils continued. Her family wanted to know how the programme had gone but Nuwani felt less and less inclined to tell them. One evening she, Kaushalya, and their aunt gathered to cook dinner. As she peeled onions, Nuwani listened to Kaushalya Akki repeat one of her favourite lines,

which was that since the war was started by the Tamils, they should now keep quiet.

She looked at her cousin whom she had adored and wanted to model herself after. She no longer trusted her. As she bent over the onions she was peeling, her tears were not just because of their sting. Manthri Nanda and Kaushalya Akki understood so little about what had really happened; they didn't really want to know, because knowing would destroy their happy, complacent world. At that moment, Nuwani resolved to stop trying to change her family. She understood that the war should not be discussed between people of the same race in their living rooms: There was no change that would ever come from such discussions. She decided to keep her opinions and truths close to her heart. She would never again expose them to the harsh, disapproving view of her family. She knew that there was now a chasm between them and her about this matter. She would stay quiet, but she would do all she could to support a peaceful future in her country. This was Nuwani's resolve.

*Kaveesha Fernando is a freelance journalist currently attached to the Sunday Times and she is also a part-time law student. She was born and bred in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She feels that growing up in Colombo during the war had a powerful impact on her and therefore she has strived to learn about the conflict at every opportunity. She is convinced that there needs to be a solution for the ethnic strife in the island that is inclusive and helps everyone live in unity.*

## *Poems*

Kaveesha Coswatte

### *The War is Over*

He came back home,  
to a wife estranged,  
to a daughter he did not know,  
grey hair on the woman's brow,  
the girl stiff in his embrace.  
Fire crackers went off in every house,  
"It's over," was in everyone's mouth,  
the temple glittered on top of the mountain,  
milk rice in every house,  
laughter like fountains.

But the sounds and light took him back  
to death and fear.  
Blasts in the distance  
he had to sleep through,  
faces of friends gone by the next meal,  
cold metal of gun  
hitting his shoulder as he fired,

leaving a bruise he can still feel,  
as if to remind him of each death he sired.

They were all just doing their duty.

It is over.

His country is saved.

But he is broken,

and doesn't know how to mend himself.

### ***Toy Gun***

A woman with two infants sells toy guns,

fashioned like real ones,

with pellets that sting.

She reaches out

through the bars of the temple fence,

towards the small boy

who came here on pilgrimage.

She fires the gun,

once,

twice.

She lets him hold the gun and pull the trigger,

his eyes widening with wonder.

This new friend is taken home,  
its sting tested against  
little sister, older sister, father,  
and then mother.

Each time the pellet hits its mark  
the satisfaction is greater.

And on the battlefield, inside the soldier,  
is still the little boy holding the toy gun,  
who grew up no further.

### ***140 Characters***

The war is over  
but the battle is embedded  
like shrapnel  
in her memory and face,  
this LTTE cadre,  
a teacher now,  
with painted nails.

A delicate pink  
On her brown hands.  
She says she is happy,  
tells me she has no hate.

The Muslim lady from Mannar,  
speaks of women used and abused,  
how it will never stop,  
how she fought back with the women of her town.  
“We only have each other,” she says,  
as she hands me the secrets of Northern women  
who must hide their faces,  
because they had to service men in high places.

The county’s “culture” under my frock,  
“morality” between my legs,  
I can’t carry the Tooth Relic,  
can’t enter a mosque,  
can’t perform rites  
in kovils and churches,  
or walk alone at dusk.  
Seems all I am good for  
is a fuck.

“My womb is not your battlefield!”  
I want to scream,  
as I see yet another online post ordering  
Sinhala women to sustain the race,  
to trump those rapidly breeding Muslims.

But 140 characters<sup>1</sup> is all I can shoot  
into this crossfire of hate.

*Kaveesha Coswatte is a law student from the University of Peradeniya hoping to specialise in Human Rights and International Law, but her heart and soul are in writing. She aspires to address social issues that no one wants to talk about in the country through her poetry. She wants to shock people by being the rebellious one. Her poetry links past and present, attempting to dance between tradition and modernity.*

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<sup>1</sup> The standard number of characters that one can type in a post on Twitter.

## *Finding Home*

Natale Dankotuwage

I had expected that once the war was over things would be different. But when I returned to Colombo, after my very first visit to Jaffna, the possibility of transcending ethnic barriers seemed a far-off dream.

I returned to Colombo and to my eldest aunt. Loku Amma, I called her. The one who had never moved, from all of the eight siblings. She still lived in my maternal grandmother's home. It was once the largest on the street; It had been a busy, festive home. Now, it stood barren, things scattered everywhere. The most noticeable, an old unused piano propped up against a wall, gifted by her late husband from when he had worked and lived in Japan. On various tables, and in glass cabinets, were souvenirs brought by her many siblings and extended family, who had gone abroad seeking a better life. She held on to them, through these little trinkets.

The morning after my return from Jaffna, I came downstairs to find Loku Amma seated reading the paper. Her soft black hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail. She peered at the first page of the newspaper through thick rimmed glasses. She was wearing a sarong that morning, something she did only amongst those most intimate to her. Her white t-shirt had a few stains from that morning's breakfast. Seeing me, she cried out, "Ah, ah, I was just thinking of you," and began to read a news article aloud to me. Sinhala Pilgrims, 184 to be exact, had been on their way to visit a local temple in Tamil Nadu, when a mob of Tamil rights activists had descended upon them. The Sinhalese pilgrims had been physically attacked and were quickly ushered back on to the buses in which they had come to discover the land and its ancient history. They weren't welcome in South India if they continued to mistreat Tamils in Sri Lanka, the paper said.

I felt defeated. I had planned to visit Pondicherry in a week's time. This would ruin everything. My family was already worried that I was thinking of going there. This attack would only add fuel to their worries. I was disappointed

with the activists. What had they achieved by attacking innocent Sinhala pilgrims?

“Tamils are like animals,” my aunt said, as she folded the paper with a self-satisfied rustle.

My disappointment gave way to anger, “Don’t blame a whole jathiya for the faults of a few,” I rebuked her in Sinhala.

She stood up and glared at me. “*They’ve* killed so many of our innocent people,” she reminded me.

Then she continued with generalisation upon generalisation. In my poor Sinhala, I tried to explain why her words upset me. My mind kept going back to the faces I’d seen in Jaffna earlier that week. Her words were an offence to their smiles, their warmth.

I was talking to a wall. My Sinhalese wasn’t good enough to reason with her. I brought up a friend of hers who was Tamil. She brushed this off as if that person was an exception to the rotten bunch.

“You’re being racist” I finally burst out in English. And, unable to take her presence anymore, I retreated to the front veranda that spanned the house, placing myself where I could see the black gate to the world beyond.

I recalled how just days earlier I had been enjoying my last night in Jaffna. I was staying at Bunker Hall, on the outskirts of Jaffna College. It stood at a point where the College met the endless fields and sparse palm trees. In the distance, you could hear the echo of waves. And, if you took a moment, beneath your feet you’d find the remnants of ancient seashells from before the receding of the sea. The land was flat and untouched and to me, seemed to contain some vitality from a time before it had succumbed to man’s need to conquer nature. That night I stood on the paved street, a full moon illuminating the landscape, and my eyes drifted up to the infinite stars.

I wondered whether my ancestors had been here centuries ago. Was this where it all began, when our ancestors first discovered the island? Did they arrive, take in this view, and fall immediately in love with its essence?

I know I had fallen in love.

On that dark street in Vaddukoddai, Jaffna, I felt I had come home after a long time. As I stood there, feeling so small amidst the ancient history of this

island, I could not help but think I must have been here before, even though I knew this didn't make sense rationally. Perhaps it had been in another life? Perhaps it was an ancestral memory?

Being there reminded me of the sensation I had felt the first time my mother brought me to the island. I was four then and my mother held my hand as she helped me down the steps out of the plane. The warm air brushed against my face that morning. It was a sunny day. Below, on the tarmac, young men and women with dark skin like mine called out to one another in a lively way, using the foreign language my mother spoke. A foreign language I had heard sparsely in the land where I was born, Canada.

I fell in love the moment I got off the plane. I wrapped my soul around the country and tied a knot. I was bound and I would love Sri Lanka forever, this home away from home.

My father had flown over earlier, had been here for two months. He was waiting in the crowded arrivals area, and I noticed him right away, amidst all the other relatives who had also come to receive us. I ran into his arms with an overwhelming, fierce love, tears from having missed him streaming down my cheeks. He held me tight for a moment, then put me down next to two children. "This is your akka and aiya," he explained pointing to the children. The young girl was 8 years old and had jet black hair and a skin many shades darker than mine. The young boy, who was 6, had a skin colour lighter than I. It was the first time I had ever met kin and I felt an immediate comforting connection. They were friendly as well, quickly offering to carry my knapsack and grabbing my hand to ask endless questions, none of which I could understand because they were talking in Sinhala. Their warm smiles were a welcome change from the sternness of all the borders we had passed.

I let them guide me out through the doors of the airport, looking back momentarily to see if my mother and father were coming. My mother, with a happy smile on her face, was immersed in a conversation with another woman, who had an uncanny resemblance to her. My mother, noticing me looking back, called me over to her. "This is your Loku Amma," she explained.

This was the first time I laid eyes on my Loku Amma. Her hair was neatly pulled back in a low ponytail and she wore a crisp, button-up, short-sleeve shirt

with a folded collar, long enough that it passed her hips modestly. That morning she had paired it with a wrap-around skirt. I would never see her wear pants that summer or ever after. Yet, even as a child, I noticed her fine selection of shoes. Low-heel, practical and of the brown leather that resembled her brother's dress shoes.

I was a little shocked. "I have another Amma?" I asked and they laughed.

My mother explained this was my aunt, her older sister. That morning, I decided to love Loku Amma with the same penetrating, unbounded love with which I loved my own mother. As Loku Amma drew me close for a hug and kissed my cheek that morning, I noticed her skin was as soft as my mother's.

As we got closer to the exit of the terminal, the hustle and bustle of passengers grew more intense. When we stepped outside, I stopped for a moment, overwhelmed by the chaos all about me: vans and cars pulling up to load passengers, sounds of honking, loud music blasting from the vehicles, and crows crying out and circling above. Despite the chaos, there was something festive to the whole thing.

Soon we were off, driving along the main road that led to Colombo. The street was filled with life. Cows, dogs, and cats freely wandered among people, some who, to my astonishment, were walking about without shoes. Women tended fires, burning discarded things on pavements outside houses. At one point, we stopped at a small kadai where I was offered a Coke. The bottle, to my surprise, was made of glass, not like the plastic ones in Canada. After I had finished my drink, my mother's brother retrieved the empty bottle from me and returned it to the store owner. I noticed now the stack of empty glass bottles lined up along a shelf behind the counter.

The car played bala. We too listened to this music in Canada, a small way my parents ensured I remained connected to my heritage. The family home was in Rajagiriya, a suburb that was just minutes from the border of the Colombo district. It was a neighbourhood to which many Sinhala families had moved, being cheaper than Colombo and also quieter and less polluted.

To arrive at my maternal grandmother's home, we had to drive along a street called Bandaranaike Pura that wound up a hill. At the very top, as we turned right, I saw before me a looming black gate, and beyond it, a two-story

house with large green vines climbing up its sides. When the gates were opened, I got a better look at the white-washed house, which was built in the colonial style with a generous front veranda. It was the biggest house I had ever been in.

As we got down from the car, we were greeted by a hunched-over, dark-skinned elderly woman in her nightgown - though it was broad daylight - and an elderly, taller, fair-skinned man in a sarong.

I was not sure if the elderly woman had even noticed me. She called over my male cousin, the fair-skinned boy, and ushered him indoors, following him in. I would soon learn that he was her favourite. The fair-skinned elderly man stayed behind with a jovial smile on his face. He was tall with white hair and wore a sarong with a polo t-shirt. He was not looking at anyone specifically as he smiled but, rather, just seemed to be welcoming the hustle and bustle as our things were brought into the house, the family moving in and out of the front door. These two individuals I would soon learn were my grandparents. They did not hug me or take a second to personally greet me. Perhaps they were too old and I too young to be noticed.

My maternal grandparents had nine children and, as a result, had acquired several grandchildren, most of whom they had met long before. I was one of the last grandchildren they had yet to meet, and perhaps the novelty of grandchildren had worn off by the time they met me. Or perhaps the fact that my parents had wed against their wishes explained their lack of interest in me. For whatever reason, they were not exceptionally affectionate the summer we arrived.

My Loku Amma made up for this with the love she lavished upon us. We were given a bedroom on the second floor, at the back of the house. It had a light yellow-tiled bathroom and a private kitchen. The bedroom opened onto a balcony, from where I could see a mango tree below and an outdoor shower. Here, my Loku Amma bathed in the wee-hours before the sun had even risen, a sarong wrapped around her body. She was the kindest of all our relatives. The one who made sure we were well fed. She would wake me in the morning and take me, still in my pyjamas, for a drive to drop my cousins at school. When they returned from school, my two cousins and I sat in the living room to watch cartoons on a television an uncle had gifted from abroad while Loku Amma fed us all from the same plate of rice.

We spent that first summer in Sri Lanka with my mother's family. When my little eyes met any of theirs my various aunts and uncles would smile. They would offer me food, hug me, sit me on their lap, and feed me. There was so much love in that home. I began to speak the foreign language my mother spoke. Sinhala, she called it. We are Sinhala, I learned. And, soon I was talking, and talking, and talking.

Life was constant. In the morning, the fisherman would come to the gate and bellow, "Malu, malu." My Loku Amma would hurry down to the large black gate and stand on the street, selecting fish for the afternoon meal, getting him to clean and chop it for her. I'd stand by the gate watching the ritual. The first time I did so, she pointed me out to him saying, "This is my niece. She's from Canada." The fisherman looked at me with wonder, as if I had come from outer space.

I never dared go out of the black gate alone. Stray dogs guarded the streets in packs and, in the afternoon, a stray herd of cows settled by the gates of our home to slumber. When I ventured out, small red stones rubbed against my feet, the warmth caressing my sole, through my rubber slippers.

Once a week, my large extended family would dress in white and we would visit Buddhist temples together. We would ceremoniously provide offerings of flowers to Buddhist statues, at various temples. I'd learn to get down on my little knees and bow to the monks who strolled through the open-air temples.

The months passed and soon it was time to part from my family and my new home. I hugged my uncles and aunts, tears streaming down my face, my body tense. I hated goodbyes, I always hated the end.

These visits to the island continued over the years. As I grew older, I began to understand there was a war; I began to understand why checkpoints existed along the streets, where police officers checked our passports. There were curfews and sudden failures of electricity, during which my maternal grandmother's house was plunged unceremoniously into darkness. My two cousins and I loved these blackout periods. It was the perfect time for us to break free into the dark garden and indulge in water fights. As a child, I accepted these things as normal occurrences in this mysterious island of summer getaways. But, as I grew older, I began to understand why it was so. And soon my heart was drawn to the plight of the Tamil people.

The reason for this was because, although I loved the island and my relatives, there were moments when I had felt unloved by them. Where this awareness of my difference first came from, I do not recall. Maybe from the taunts of my other older cousins who, when they visited, would good-humouredly tease me about how dark I was. There were times I'd overhear an aunt say about me, "She is quite beautiful. If only she weren't so dark." I began to observe how my cousins or siblings who were fair skinned were favoured by certain other relatives. My fairer cousins were often embraced and held longer than I was. This particularly hurt as I reached adolescence.

"You look Tamil," was one of the taunts my cousins used when teasing me.

At first, I wondered why I should be ashamed of looking Tamil, but then I slowly realised that they associated dark skin with Tamils.

Most of our summers were spent with my maternal relations, and I had been taught to be proud of their heritage. My mother was the child of a high-caste Kandyan who had been educated in English and who spent his afternoons with his glasses on the rim of his nose reading English newspapers, because he couldn't read Sinhala. My grandfather was the son of a great lineage with many doctors, lawyers, and government officials in it. He had married my grandmother of the same blacksmith caste.

As I grew older, I came to realise that my maternal side considered my paternal heritage shameful. My father had grown up on a small plot of land in the low-income neighbourhoods of Kotahena. His mother was educated only in Sinhala. She was a proud woman who ran her own kadai, and she did not have that Victorian notion of femininity that my maternal relatives prized. She was known for her aggressive and manly nature. Ministers would come in search of her to round up votes in the area. Her surname was Arachi, chieftain, and when I first heard stories of her, I felt she had carried the village chief's tact with her to the big city.

I don't know when I first learned to hide that part of my ancestry that lacked wealth and Western education. The little I do know about this side of my family was picked up in bits and pieces as the years progressed.

But then, after the passing of my grandmother, my father's eight siblings all migrated to Canada, sponsored by him. My grandfather was the final family

member to come. He spent most of his time in East Toronto in an apartment building, with his two youngest children. Now, for the first time, I began to visit this side of my family, my father taking me along with him. My grandfather was a quiet man, often disappearing on a bicycle when the family gathered.

The building where my grandfather lived was filled to the brim with Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants. From what I remember, he would spend most of his time with the Sri Lankan Tamil neighbours. When we visited, I would often see him seated with old Tamil men on benches outside or on the lobby sofas, chatting away. In their midst, he lit up. I was surprised to see he not only spoke Tamil, but evidently perfect Jaffna Tamil, according to these neighbours. When I asked my father about this, he suggested that this was because of his time working in the post office back in Colombo. Yet, I noticed the way my father's eyes darted down as he said this. Later, one of my paternal aunts told me the story of how my grandfather had arrived in Colombo and met my grandmother. He had come by train, having run away from a home he never spoke of. No one knew where he truly came from.

He died on his first visit back to South Asia, after years away. He had gone on a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya, and had a stroke there. He was rushed to an emergency ward and then to Sri Lanka. For a summer he remained paralysed in my paternal home in Kotahena. The house was extremely small with little to no sunlight.

It was only after his passing, when returning for his funeral, that I discovered my grandfather had brothers, who had sons, and that they were house-builders. But what city they came from, they did not say. And I did not ask.

In the summer of my paternal grandfather's passing, my father spent most of his time where he was raised. I too was visiting the island that summer and I would visit him often, staying for the first time in the home where he was raised. I spent time walking in the small lanes of his family's neighbourhood. In some of the surrounding houses, there were various relatives of his. Other houses in the neighbourhood were rented to Tamil or Muslim families, some of them labourers. In my mother's neighbourhood, such diversity of class, race, and ethnicity did not exist. My father would observe my exchanges with this diverse and vibrant world that was his home. And, though he was usually not

one to express his emotions, one night as he drove me through Colombo, back to my maternal side, he said, as we parted, “I am fond of your kind heart.”

Like the heritage of my paternal side, the history of this island is complex and mysterious. I might very well have closer connections to those people I encountered in the North; might very well be one of them. Though I may not speak the ancient tongue of the North, that night in Vaddukoddai, Jaffna, as I stood under the stars, I felt my spirit touch those of the people around me, and touch also the land. I had felt at home there. So that when I returned to my Loku Amma in Rajagiriya, to what was after all my home in Sri Lanka, I had become a stranger to it and her. A stranger to her strong patriotic pride, her sureness of her distinct racial superiority as a Sinhalese. I, on the other hand, saw undeniable connections between these two divided races.

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## *Eelam*

A. A.

Anoj stared up at the giant portrait of Velupillai Prabhakaran in its gilt frame. The portrait hung many metres above the ground, imposing in its solemn place at the top of the wooden stage. Arrayed around the fleshy face of Prabhakaran, the *Thalaivar* of Eelam, hung a heavy necklace of freshly picked flowers, the scent delicately wafting into the sticky night air. The portrait peered stonily down at the thousands of waiting people, tightly gathered in the open arena.

The air crackled with tension as a tall, gaunt-looking man took the stage beneath the portrait. His forehead glistened in the intense heat. The spokesman's hands gripped the lectern hard as he leaned forward into the microphone, his beady eyes scanning the sea of people. He shouted in rapid Tamil to the crowd gathered beneath, "I ask you all for your patience and support during these difficult times. It is a testing time for us as we reach new milestones every day. Our Eelam Government is working to help you and resolve your concerns. I promise you that the convoys are on their way and will be here by the end of this week. It takes some time to bring supplies in from the borders. The checkpoints have yet to be installed in all locations along the southern borders of our State..."

Anoj zoned out while the spokesman from the ruling Party continued his rambling speech. He was hot and sweaty in this mass of people. The thick Jaffna heat made his shirt cling to his body like a wet second skin. Someone elbowed him in the back, as people pushed past him towards the front, eager to see the newly elected politicians arrayed on the stage far ahead. Jolted forward, Anoj rubbed his shoulder and focused on the *Thalaivar's* looming face, high above the crowd. He hated coming to these political rallies, there was always too much noise, and dust. At 19, Anoj was still small for his age and, invariably, he would be shoved in the tumultuous sway of all these pressed bodies. His mother stood ahead of him, pushed close to the people in front; he could see her greying head nodding in deep assent to the Party spokesman's speech. Anoj wondered if the rally would end soon. If it wasn't for the fact that he could go to Jana's house afterward, he would never have come here. He preferred avoiding any

sort of gathering or social occasion altogether. There was something wild and unpredictable about a large group of people – the rapid movements of bodies, clenched hands, and the sharp breathing of individuals as they harangued and shouted at each other was enough to set off an echoing unease inside him. He could barely see the stage anyway.

The loudspeaker crackled overhead and Anoj could tell, after two years of attending the new Government's weekly rallies, that the spokesman's shouting had started to taper off. The speech was about to come to an end. A subdued silence settled over the crowd and the spokesman returned to his seat. At this point, various individuals on the makeshift stage got up from their assorted chairs and placed their hands over their hearts.

A loud, insistent tune started up, amplified by the huge speakers on the sides of the stage. The crowd of thousands beneath the raised stage broke into song. They were singing the national anthem of Eelam. Only two years ago this action had seemed blasphemous and shocking. Even the leaders of the ruling party had initially been hesitant to sing the anthem openly, remembering as they did the long and brutal struggle to win this self-determination. Now, everyone in attendance was familiar with the routine. The anthem was short and melodious; it was written shortly after Independence by one of the local poets from Eelam's second-largest city, Vavuniya. Eelam had had no anthem or flag for more than a year. The ruling Party had ultimately advertised a competition for a national anthem. All nations should have a national anthem, they had said in the ad, which also advertised for a new flag. The winning design stood on the stage behind the gathered dignitaries, waving sultrily in the warm wind. It featured the bold red and yellow of Eelam with a karthigai flower stamped in the middle, and flew tall over all those gathered. As the anthem ended, the chattering of the crowd rose and the politicians disappeared backstage. The crowd began to disperse, their voices rising and mingling in the thick evening air.

Anoj's amma gripped him hard by the shoulder and steered him through the narrow barrier outside. Shrugging her hand off as he walked past the exit, Anoj was about to sprint to Jana's place when his amma grabbed his arm and said quickly, "Kanna, we are out of milk and sugar. Can you go to Selva mama's house now and get it for me? We are expecting Jeya Auntie for tea, so get it before you come home. Hurry back." Anoj nodded and followed his mother out.

Now they were both caught up in the slow human stream passing across the dusty government square outside the newly built parliament building. Jaffna, as Eelam's capital, had changed a lot in the last two years. Ever since the Peace Treaty with Eelam's neighbour Sri Lanka, there had been a lot of demolition and building in the town centre. All around him, Anoj could see people chattering to their relatives and neighbours about the convoy problem down near the southern border. A convoy issue meant that there would be food restrictions, maybe for another six months like the last time, almost a year and a half ago. Food blockages had occurred a few times since Independence two years ago although they rarely lasted more than two months. Sri Lanka refused to supply the new nation with rice, tea, cassava, and other staples and India imposed a heavy export tax on Eelam, to placate Sri Lanka. With most of the paddy and necessary food crops in the other country, Eelam had struggled to feed itself. It had been a rocky start to the new nation. The harsh dusty landscape of the North provided little in the way of fertile land. However, people managed, as they always had done.

Anoj grabbed his bicycle from where he had chained it and pedalled hard, avoiding the potholes scattered across the pebbly dirt road. Jaffna roads were in a bad state and most had yet to be fixed. The clear night sky opened up before him, the crowd thinning out as the various districts of Jaffna town passed by. He pedalled through Kondavil and then through Urumpirai, passing the lone rickshaw going in the opposite direction.

Although Jaffna was the capital, it remained somewhat cautious, the streets empty and watchful after dark. Homeless dogs roamed the streets. The gated houses stood back from the road, not a light shining within. Many people who had once lived in this proud town had left, broken and distrustful after the decades of fighting and destruction. Anoj's appamma said that mournful ghosts roamed many of these empty houses, waiting for their loved ones to return. Anoj paid no attention to such old wives' tales.. He was used to the unnatural stillness of Jaffna's lanes. In fact, he liked it. All his life he had lived in a small village beyond the outskirts of Jaffna, where paddy was the main crop. The deep quiet there would permeate the air of the surrounding fields like a thick, fine gauze.

Up ahead, Anoj recognised a group of boys his age from Chavakachcheri,

a neighbouring village to his. He debated whether to go and speak to them or head to Selva mama's house, which was close by. He saw that there were quite a few of them hanging around the lone tea-stall open on the side of the road, things could get rowdy. Although he was older than these boys, Anoj was wary of approaching them, even though they were friends.

His thinness and short-legged gait meant he was often mistaken for a much younger boy. It had certainly worked to his advantage at times. After his brief period in the war, fighting alongside mostly older cadres in Mullivaikal, learning how to handle Ak-47s and bandage amputated limbs, Anoj had been injured by a falling army shell during the final stages. The injuries had twisted his left leg, and every so often, especially when it rained, he would feel a twinge of pain throb outwards from the thigh-bone. The injury meant that he was out of combat when the military's shells fell on his people and cadres out on that desolate beach.

His injury, short stature, and youth had helped him to survive the war. After his capture, he had been considered unlikely to be knowledgeable about the *Iyaarkam* in the post-war internment camps at Manik Farm. Indeed, he considered himself lucky, so many of his ex-cadres had been tortured mercilessly and endlessly by the security forces. He had watched with a thudding heart from behind barbed wire as they rounded up his fellow *puli*, and pushed them into blacked-out, dirty jeeps. He never saw many of them again.

After he had left the IDP camps and been reunited with his mother and two siblings in a temporary camp, Anoj tried hard to engage with the daily routines of his former life. While in Manik Camp, his mother drilled into him the need to practice English. Being a schoolteacher, she understood well the importance of education to open doors, no matter the circumstance. In those lean few years as a referendum was proposed and the North voted for independence, Anoj's mother had considered strongly the possibility of fleeing like so many others of her people to far nations abroad, nations would not welcome them but at least give them the assurance of safety and solidity.

She had held off, unwilling to leave their native land. The independence of Eelam had come at a crucial time then, for them. It had been a remarkably smooth transition to a new nation, all things considered. After the Peace Treaty was signed, Anoj and his family had left the camp and made the gruelling journey

back north to the farming land their family had held for four generations. The family land also held Anoj's father's grave; he had died when Anoj was a young boy, fighting for the Tigers in a distant battle.

It was never really an option for the family to leave this place. Their ancestry was interlinked with this particular and exact piece of earth. The reforms brought about by Eelam's independence were more than two years old now and Anoj was still getting used to his new life in the new country. He felt more anchored and grounded than he had ever remembered being. So too were his family and neighbours. The stability of life was surprising to everyone. The weariness of all the displacements, of all the shifting and packing and stopping and starting again, of living under the Tigers since his earlier memories, of surviving the war, of struggling in an IDP camp and then back to living in Tamil-controlled Eelam, had finally ended. There was a measure of safety now in his life that he had never experienced before. It was a disquieting feeling sometimes.

The night air had cooled and the trees swayed gently against each other in the dull wind. Anoj cycled the last remaining distance to Selva mama's house, riding past a bullock cart carrying a family of ten as it ambled along. A dirt road turn-off up ahead wound its way down a large tract of dry, dusty farmland. He cycled the unlit road and reached Selva mama's front gate. It was locked. Anoj knocked on the metal gate and told the man standing sentry what he wanted.

Selva mama operated a small black market out of his house in sugar, spices and soap, all the things that were rationed carefully by the new Government. The food shortage in Eelam meant it was difficult to get certain comforts of life, like tea and chocolate. Anoj hoped that the shortage was just temporary. Last time, it had eased off in a few months with help from sympathetic nations and the diaspora. He hoped for the same now.

Otherwise life would be hard, and the populace would begin to grumble again about the stupidity of gaining independence from Sri Lanka. He had heard that the Sinhala population was coming to terms with the independence, as it had forged a peace between the two main ethnicities. There were Sinhala people living in Eelam, especially down near its southern border, who often facilitated the trade between the two nations. But the politicians in Sri Lanka were still furious. There was talk of agents sent to destabilise the new country. Anoj had heard whispers of

spies and anti-government infiltrators agitating the people. He hoped it was just rumours.

Anoj walked up the familiar path to his uncle's house. Selva mama was related through his wife to a politician in Eelam's government, which was how he managed to get extra rations. It was just enough for him to sell on the side for a tidy profit to a few carefully selected friends. Even with a politician as a relative, Anoj knew that Selva mama was risking much by operating the black market illegally; those who were caught selling rations were harshly penalised. Last month, the government had confiscated the land of a black market profiteer in Mannar and stripped him of all his assets. The profiteer's family had lost everything. He had overheard the story being discussed between his mother and Selva mama, when they were out tilling the paddy. It made him feel uneasy to think about it. People needed to eat. He couldn't understand why the government would take such a harsh view of the black market. Anoj stood in the unlit veranda to Selva mama's back door. He gave the door a light knock, three times. He could hear footsteps approaching, and the door opened cautiously. Selva mama stood in the dim light of the living room. Recognising his nephew, he let him in.

The black market's goods were arrayed in wooden boxes, hidden expertly behind a large cabinet that masked a deep pocket in the mud-brick wall. Anoj asked his uncle for tea, sugar, and some chocolate biscuits, which Selva mama dug around for in the chests. Bringing up the wares clasped in both of his meaty hands, Selva mama wrapped them in a newspaper and dropped the package into a bag. As he handed over the goods, he asked after Anoj's mother and siblings, and joked with him about his studies. Anoj knew his uncle found him to be a quiet and unremarkable boy; he replied that he was thinking of doing a carpentry apprenticeship after his exams. He did not have a head for numbers or indeed, much in the way of words. He had difficulty concentrating for long periods of time on the books in front of him, the letters swimming on the page. But he was good with his hands. Carpentry suited him just fine. Carving wood, shaping it into forms, and being surrounded by nothing but the sound of wood being shaved – that was a good life for him. Anoj took the wares from his uncle and wrapped the bag carefully in a coloured cloth, before placing it inside his over-the-shoulder bag. They continued to talk in low voices, as they exchanged news of the family and his uncle packed up the rest of the goods, to be stored behind the hidden wall.

A sharp rap on the door echoed through the house. Selva mama stiffened and when their eyes met, his face was clenched in a deep frown. Seconds passed, and there was another rap, the sound pulsing through the darkened rooms. Anoj looked at the clock on the wall, it read 9:35 p.m. exactly. His heart was thudding. Selva mama quickly pushed the cabinet into place and, wiping his beard with his hands, he said, “Anoj, please leave through the side door. I am having some customers over tonight, but they seem to be a bit early, so it is best if you go now.”

Anoj nodded, but Selva mama was already moving through the passageway to the front door. Anoj gripped his bag and quietly passed through the dark hallway to the last bedroom of the house. There was no light but Anoj found his way easily; he knew the house well, having spent much time here as a child, especially after his own father passed away and his mother had turned to her brother for advice and support in raising three children. The sound of deep voices could be heard from the sitting room. It was hard to hear how many people had come. In the dark, Anoj reached the bedroom he was looking for. It had a door that led to a side veranda. He moved silently to it, and tried to push it open. The door wouldn't budge and he saw that it had been padlocked at the top. The key was usually kept in a chest of drawers next to the door. Pulling the top drawer open, he rummaged inside. There was no key. His breath coming in spurts, Anoj moved to the desk and felt around on its surface, opening some tins. Then he moved his hand carefully along a shelf above the desks. Still no key. The voices of men were becoming louder and louder. He could hear at least four different voices from the living room. Pricks of panic attacked his stomach; he shouldn't be here, caught with smuggled goods in his backpack. Anoj tried to pull the padlock off, but it wouldn't budge. He bit his lip and his heart beat even quicker. The voices were still raised and now two people were shouting. He couldn't understand what they were saying because the walls muffled their voices. For all he knew they could be speaking Tamil or English or a whole other language. He tried to concentrate on finding that key. The voices were distracting him, he couldn't think of where to look. Anoj realised he hadn't heard Selva mama's voice for a while now. In the minute that passed, there was a thud in a room far off. Someone was shouting, but he couldn't understand the words in the grind of his racing thoughts. He heard heavy footsteps coming up the hallway.

He scanned the room and moving quickly, knelt by the chest of drawers and opened the bottom one. Grabbing the Bible that lay in the drawer, he

reached past some clutter and lifted out a small automatic pistol that lay half-hidden. The smooth, chilled metal felt dense in his hands. He hadn't held a gun since the war, and it was a strange feeling to pick one up again. He seemed to know what to do almost without conscious thought. His training for combat in the war had been very minimal, but in the heat of the battle, he had had to learn very quickly. He opened the magazine and saw that the gun was fully loaded. He shut the magazine, flicked the safety catch on and, gripping the handle of the gun tightly, he crouched down and rolled into the narrow space under the bed. His mind had gone blank, like a trained soldier, every detail lucid and sharp around him. The space was narrow, the bed only a few inches above his face. Facing the door, he lay on his stomach.

The seconds trickled past. Then the door was kicked open and two men walked in. Their boots were worn and black. Neither pair belonged to his uncle; Selva mama always wore sandals. The men moved about, searching for something. In silence, they dragged the drawers from the desk and pulled the clothes from the closet. Anoj did not make a sound. His heart thumped wildly, but his mind had gone strangely blank. He didn't know who they were, or what they wanted. He knew that it was only a matter of time before they would search under the bed. He licked his parched lips. In that moment, with a gun clasped tightly between his steady fingers, Anoj knew he would have to make a choice. The clock ticked slowly, counting down each precious drawn-out second. Calming his breathing, his mind did a strange thing to him then; he was once again back on that beach in Mullivaikal. He could hear the screams of injured thousands ringing in his ears. He remembered how the salt of the Nandikadal lagoon bit into the raw wounds across his legs and arms. He did not feel regret then or now, only a bone-deep weariness that this life of his had been lived with so much struggle. The footsteps stopped next to the bed and moved the sheets. Soon, the figure would stoop and check under the bed. Anoj was once again a soldier, fighting an enemy. Except this time the enemy was unknown, and he did not have a bigger purpose – he was not fighting for a land, for his people's freedom and equality. This moment was about his self-preservation. Wasn't his people's war about self-preservation too? Anoj didn't have time to think. He cocked the gun and pointed.

*A. A was born in Sri Lanka and now lives abroad. Their story was published anonymously because of the themes involved and the apolitical nature of the work A. A does in their normal life. They fear the repercussions often suffered by those speaking about such issues openly. Although A. A lives abroad, they often dream of the restless Palmyra trees and the lush paddy fields of their homeland. They long to return home permanently, one day.*

## *Poems*

Sabaratnam Kirusanthan

### *The Blackboard*

Laid out on the road,  
white shirt splotted with  
the blood that had oozed from his head,  
he might have been a teenager,  
his bicycle sprawled by his side,  
in front of our Kovil.

It was a casual occurrence for us.  
We had made ourselves blind,  
never allowed ourselves to ask questions.

Within a few minutes  
the image was erased.  
Our minds were  
cleaned blackboards,  
no one could see  
what had been written there before.

But the board knows.  
It holds thousands of words,  
under its wiped surface.  
Under its skin.

Poor creature  
The blackboard.

***Tossed***

Before,  
in a spacious house  
painted light blue,  
shaded by trees,  
we were busy with our neighbours  
sharing, caring,  
happiness was everywhere.

During,  
a cyclone swept through our lives,  
levelled the house,  
scattered our things,  
destroyed our loved ones,  
made refugees of us.

Now,  
we live like tree stumps,  
decapitated.

***Broken Toy***

Clumped hair, blue eyes,  
raggedy clothes, a broken hand  
gripped by the little boy,  
this sweet doll,  
this broken toy.

A visitor brought it  
to the camp  
they now call home.  
It filled him with joy,  
his sister's broken toy.

He looks into its eyes,  
it looks back at him.  
Where is my sister?  
"You are here inside,  
she is outside."

He twists its hand  
and asks again,  
Where is my sister?  
"You are inside.  
She is outside."

*Sabarathnam Kirusanthan* was born and raised in Jaffna. He was in Jaffna throughout the war. Most of his poems describe his experiences during the war. He likes to transform the images he captured from his childhood into words.

## *No White Flags for Him*

Amra Ismail

The tan buildings of the Presidential Secretariat loom high and wide, concealing khaki-clad officials who are no doubt plotting to disperse the silent protesters. Next to Renuka is a large framed photograph of Suren who disappeared a hundred days ago.

Perspiration glues the tendrils of her hair, like spider legs, to her forehead. Her daughter, just two years old, sits on her lap. The child is used to sitting in the sun protesting. She is the mirror image of the man Renuka is fighting for.

Cars, buses, and lorries of every hue whiz along the road, adding to the heat that feels like it penetrates every cell of her skin. When a bus launches itself into a honking battle with a three-wheeler, little Chathu covers her ears with her tiny palms, the baby blue cap failing to protect her. She looks at the two vehicles mesmerised by their aggression and ear-piercing tooting.

Renuka, as she sits here blinded by the sun, recalls that day when Maharala, their neighbour, who worked with Suren in the fruit shop, came running into her half-built house. His sarong had loosened and he was tying the knot as fast as he could. Usually Renuka would have laughed her gap-toothed laugh when she saw him this way. But now her heart thudded in her chest at the sight of his horror-stricken face.

“Sudu van ekak,” Maharala screamed. He told her that the dreaded white van had taken her husband. Renuka felt as if her house was crumbling on her and she leaned against a wall as if to prop up the house and herself.

Before dawn that morning, she had dreamt of her husband being beaten by thugs in the middle of the road. When they woke up, she wanted Suren to stay back, but he had laughed and said, “You believe that nonsense?” Yet, she was worried. It was an inauspicious dream, a warning and she had felt uneasy all day. And now her premonition had come true.

Her brother was spending the day at her house. He had just completed his Ordinary Level studies and had been making a toy with coconut shells for Chathu, when they heard the news. “Malli, look after Chathu,” she said to him, grabbing her pink purse that held her ID and a meagre Rs. 200 and running, stumbling with fear to the police station. Maharala followed her. She gave her statement and the police gave her a receipt. It said that Suren was last seen near his shop on the Vijithapura Road in Anuradhapura and that he had been abducted by a white van along with Kolu, the 17-year old boy who worked in his shop.

For the next two days, her neighbours visited her. They sat with her as Chathu played alone in a corner of a bedroom. Earlier, the women used to gossip every evening and their laughter could be heard even from the top of the narrow lane where Renuka’s house was. But now there was no hilarious uproar. Instead, the women whispered, as one of them held Renuka’s hand. Even though there were no white flags, the house held a funeral atmosphere.

Renuka was fair, compared to the other women in her village. She had a full-moon face and was always smiling at everyone. Now there were dark circles below her eyes that her light skin made all the more evident. Her hair, which she usually wore in a plait, had been pulled up into a tight bun.

Renuka expected a police jeep to bring Suren back any moment. She would welcome him with garlands as he had so ardently wished in jest. She would do anything to be in his arms again. She desperately waited on the veranda as the women chatted around her. She would look at the road often to find it empty, except for the stray dogs that frequented it.

“I know these police fellows very well. They will do nothing unless you give them something,” said Priya who lived near the temple. Soma told her how the police ignored her when she made a complaint after her purse was snatched. “They gave me a letter so I could get an ID. But they never searched for the rogue. It was Independence Day. They wanted to be free!” said Soma.

Kanthi, who lived closest to her, told her about a female police constable who had assaulted an underage rape victim. Stories flowed among the gathered women about police incompetence, and how the police had tortured innocent

barbers, bystanders and victims. Renuka had never heard the stories before. She realised that reality seeped in only when one faced a calamity.

For two days she did not hear from the police. She went back to the police station after three days. The moustache-rolling, Officer-In-Charge, exchanging looks with his junior officers, told her they had not yet looked into it. The village women had been right. The police would not look into it. She had neither influence nor money to convince them. Renuka was confused and desolate. She had always admired the police. In fact, she had counselled her malli to join the police force.

She could not understand why Suren had been abducted by a white van. He had once told her about how the body of an actor had washed onto the beaches of Colombo. She had also heard someone speak of a newspaper editor being killed. She didn't listen to the news but she knew that people connected to the LTTE were being abducted. She never approved or disapproved of this. She simply listened, awed by the stories. At times, she pitied the families of the victims. But she never gave the stories much thought. But, why would they take Suren? He was just a fruit seller; he would be the last person to meddle with the government. Surely he must have been mistaken for someone else, she thought. He will come back.

She went and met the Senior Superintendent for Anuradhapura. He was attentive to her but, as she spoke, she noticed his eyes on her breasts. The dark circles around his eyes emphasised the dissolute pleasure he got from leering at her. She had once been the Avurudu Kumari in her village New Year celebrations and was considered beautiful. Renuka wanted to spit in his face. She had heard of women who had to offer themselves as bribes to recover their men.

Two years ago, her neighbour, Sakunthala, who was a school teacher, had been raped by the magistrate who was judging her husband's case. Her husband had been caught in a brawl at the village tavern at the corner of the Abhaya Street where you could hear tin cups clattering in broad daylight. He had been unable to pay the bail. The magistrate had given Sakunthala his number through her lawyer. She had called him seeking help and he had asked her to come to the main junction where he had forcibly taken her to a rest-house and raped her. When she heard this, Renuka had exclaimed at the stupidity of Sakunthala for

walking into such a trap. She could have run away, she had thought. But now she realised that running away was not an option. Desperation made one a plant that cannot fight the monsoon. The only hope was to endure the onslaught.

In the past, Suren had been the pillar she held onto. When her mother passed away, she sat dumb in a corner for the first few days. They were newly married at the time and it was Suren who consoled her. Suren cuddled her often and Renuka blushed at this affection but loved it. When they talked in bed, she would rest her face on his bare chest and he would put his arms around her. Sometimes, they just existed together in companionable silence.

Three weeks after the disappearance, Renuka travelled to Colombo in a bus that broke down in Negombo. She had to spend two hours, until the bus was fixed, standing in a crowded shop for shelter. Some of her fellow passengers took other buses. But people like Renuka did not trust the people in Negombo. They found safety only in the bus they had travelled in. She'd already had to endure the viridhu singers who pestered her for money with their sad but rhythmic songs that resonated throughout the tedious journey.

When she got to Colombo, she placed a complaint at the National Police Commission and the National Human Rights Commission. Thirty days passed and nothing happened.

During this period, two police officers visited her house and questioned her about Suren.

“What did he do for a living?” one of them asked.

“He sold fruits,” she said.

“Hmmm,” he took two sips of tea.

“When did he disappear?”

“He was abducted by a WHITE VAN, *sir*.”

Renuka couldn't believe that she had to repeat the story she had narrated everywhere. It was as if she had studied a history lesson that she had to recall at an exam. There seemed to be no end to the repetition. The same questions were asked, the same answers given. Each time she had to repeat her story, her pain and suffering were aggravated.

While one officer questioned her, the other, who was thin and tall, went outside and peeped through the curtain into the only bedroom in the house. Then he strolled around the outside garden and plucked an ambarella fruit, which he chewed. The other officer asked her about the ownership of the house and the health of the other family members. It was as if they had come to pay a visit to her house, as a friend would to another friend. It seemed that they had come merely to drink a cup of sweet milk tea, which was a luxury Renuka did not bestow upon herself. Chathu was given milk only once a day though she cried and wept often, asking for more.

“*Gihing ennang, nona,*” one of them said on leaving. They were polite. But whether their ‘inquiry’ would lead anywhere was doubtful.

One day, she had just given Chathu a bath and was applying oil on her body when a gentleman in a light blue shirt and denims came to her house. He jumped over the gate, not knowing that if he had lifted the top cross bar it would have swung open for him. He was Herman Dias from ‘Right to Justice’, an NGO.

When he was in front of her, he asked, “How are you?”

Renuka was taken aback, no one had really asked her about herself before. It had always been about Suren’s disappearance. There was a tinge of permanency that surrounded his absence now.

She asked Mr. Dias to sit on the purple plastic chair. She sat on the veranda holding Chathu who was now sucking her thumb. It was a habit she had learnt recently. Mr. Dias inquired about Chathu. Then he approached the subject of Suren’s disappearance and asked delicately, “What do you plan to do next?”

“I don’t know sir. Frankly, no one is interested in this matter. The police only look into it to prove that they’re doing something.” She gulped and then broke down crying. Mr. Dias was uneasy. He stood and paced up and down the veranda. He said they needed to launch protests every week in front of the police station. “We’ll start from this Monday,” he said.

“But, but...” Renuka was lost for words. How could she, the mother of a little girl, protest all alone? Mr. Dias assured her that he would be there for her. But, still, she wasn’t convinced. How could she protest? The very word was taboo in her mind.

“Ask your friends to come as well. Don’t worry. We will make the placards and we will upload videos on Facebook. Who knows, what if the President sees them?” He grinned. She did not know what *uploading* or *Facebook* were, but she now had faith that they would rescue her husband. She offered him a cup of tea using more of her precious milk supply. He loved it. “Mmm, I’m having homemade tea after so long,” he said.

“Why is that, sir?” she asked.

“I just returned from London where I pursued my studies. So you see, this is a luxury,” he said. He was in his thirties, light skinned with long thick curly locks that fell on his face. His eyebrows went up and down with the cadence of his speech. “I have to leave tonight to Colombo. Call me if you need anything. Here is my card,” he said and gave her a card with printed letters in English that Renuka could barely understand. There were two numbers at the bottom and Renuka asked if she should call them. “This one is my office number. This is my mobile number,” he pointed out. Renuka had no phone but she gave her neighbour Maharala’s number. “I will call your neighbour if I need to contact you,” he said.

He left with his black bag that had his laptop. From the veranda, she looked at his retreating figure. She hoped that he would save her from her plight.

She mustered the energy to work on the protest and convinced her neighbours to come with her. Some were afraid that they would get arrested and would have to go to court. But her other friends convinced them saying things like, “Menaka, can you remember how Suren helped you build your house?”

“Jayantha, can you remember how he settled your land fight with Amarasekara?”

“He made the roof of your house when it fell off during the monsoon.”

“He was with your father when he died at the hospital.” Renuka couldn’t suppress her tears. Their words sounded like eulogies to her. Soon there was a group of twenty-four people willing to protest with her.

Monday dawned. She sat in front of the police station for two long hours with Mr. Dias carrying a placard that read, *Where is my husband?*, but no one even noticed that she was protesting. It was 10 a.m. in the morning. Some

were standing and some were seated. But Renuka noticed that, as the sun grew stronger, her group diminished. At the end, when it was 12:00 p.m. only two neighbours and Mr. Dias were left.

The next day, a police officer in plain clothes came to her house. He looked like a typical politician in the comic strips. He wore a white shirt that was too tight for him and strained over his belly, the shirt buttons like bullets about to shoot out at her at any moment. The officer wasn't after her tea; he was *genuinely* concerned about Suren's disappearance. "These are orders from above. We can do nothing against them though we're doing our best," he told her. Later, she had wondered if he was concerned about her husband or for himself and the other officers at his station. She continued the weekly Monday silent protests and Chathu sat on her lap throughout. Mr. Dias and some village men and women joined her, though they were few. The police pretended to not even notice. Groups of male and female officers would go for lunch or go out on patrol duty, without even a glance at them. They acted as if the place in front of the station was deserted. People videoed the protest. She was told the video was circulated on social media. All this made no sense to her. Another month flew by and she heard no news except for the occasional gossip about who could have taken him and why.

Mr. Dias visited her one day. He paced up and down the veranda. He walked into the outer compound and plucked jasmine flowers that Renuka thought he was going to offer to the Buddha. Instead, he only crushed and threw them away. Clearly, he was not a religious person.

"Is it okay if I spend the night at your place? I thought of going to the police station to meet the ASP tomorrow. He wasn't there when I went today. I can sleep here, on the veranda," Mr. Dias asked feebly. She was taken aback.

"Yes, yes, of course," she replied hastily to conceal her hesitance.

"The blanket I have will do," he said.

She feigned an excuse that she had to fetch something for Chathu from her neighbour and, gathering her daughter up, hurried next door.

The next morning, as she crept back into the house, she heard Mr. Dias snoring wildly. He had not even noticed her absence.

For breakfast, they had quite a lavish meal ordered by Mr. Dias from the shop at the junction where most travellers stopped for meals and to relieve themselves. There were string hoppers, kiri hodi, and pol sambol. It was his way of showing gratitude for her kindness in letting him stay here. Mr. Dias was the only son of a wealthy businessman in Colombo. When he took up human rights activism he made a promise to himself that he would not get involved in his father's business. "I don't like it. There are clashes every now and then between the estate workers and the Sinhalese workers. I can't handle it," he told Renuka remorsefully.

"Don't you think you let them down?" Renuka asked sensing that perhaps his parents had cut ties with him. He did not seem to be as well off as he claimed.

"I do, and I'm paying for it now," he said resentfully. "Please let's not talk about it, anymore."

After a moment he said, "I have been thinking maybe you should consider protesting in front of the Presidential Secretariat. That way we can attract more attention." So it was decided. They would protest on the 21st of June, a hundred days after the disappearance. He would write to other voluntary organisations and media organisations.

But a thought lingered in Renuka's heart: what if Suren came back before? All their effort would be futile. This brief hope flickered, then went out. It was unlikely. Life had come to a standstill.

The day before the protest, she packed a bundle with sets of clothes for her and Chathu, and a water bottle along with some documents Mr. Dias had asked her to bring. She wrapped all this in an old bed sheet that she then tied up with a polythene wrap. She had Rs. 2,250 in her pink purse, the cheap leather of which had decayed and cracked. The yellow backing under the leather was visible through the cracks and reminded her of the cracks that had started appearing on the walls of their toilet.

That night, Renuka pulled the mosquito net over Chathu who was asleep, sucking her left thumb. She tucked the pink net into all four corners of the bed and went to gaze through the metal bars of the open window. The night wind ruffled her hair like a sea anemone and she recalled how once Suren had caught her unawares while she was dreaming of a paradisiacal future. He had made a

deep growling voice scaring her and woken little Chathu. It had taken twenty minutes of singing lullabies and rocking to put her back to sleep. After that, he had held Renuka from behind and gently tucked her silky hair behind her earlobes. He had kissed her ears and together they had looked through the metal bars towards the dark eerie night brightened by the moon that lightened their outer compound like a flashlight.

Renuka was distracted from her memories by a sudden movement outside. It took a minute for her to realise what was happening. Two men were crawling towards the window. She wanted to scream but she didn't. She ducked down so that they couldn't see her. A letter was pushed through the metal bars and it fell on her lap.

"You talk too much," one of the men hissed and, after a moment, she heard them creep back out through the bushes.

She had hardly spoken at the protests. She had thought that she was invisible. With trembling fingers she tore open the letter. It threatened her with death and asked her not to go to Colombo. "He is paying for his sins," it read. Her mind was ablaze and she felt the absence of Suren more intensely now that she was in mortal terror.

*You talk too much*, the words echoed through the threatening night. But, despite the menacing tone, she saw value in the letter. It was an acknowledgement of her efforts. She was convinced the men knew of Suren's whereabouts. Now her fight felt worthwhile.



A young girl, wearing a white shirt that sways with the wind, walks through the protesters in front of the Presidential Secretariat towards Renuka. Her eyes shine as brightly as the black buttons on her shirt. "I am Nirmali, a journalist," she says, when she reaches Renuka. "I want to know why you're here."

The thin young girl, who has her hair in a bun higher up than village women wear it, reminds Renuka of a glistening pearl inside an oyster shell. Nirmali

sits down next to her. She says she has heard of people like Renuka, about the disappeared. She says that she lived through the war unaffected. It is only now she is beginning to understand what happened, as she searches for ‘good stories’. She now waits for Renuka to tell her.

“They tell me my husband is dead. But who killed him? Where? They tell me he has paid for his sins. What are his sins? Who are they to play with karma?” Renuka says, her voice trembling.

“But who are ‘They?’” asks the journalist.

“I don’t know.” The tears she has held back trickle down her cheeks. “I want to meet the President,” she sobs. She does not say that she has a young child to educate, to give in marriage. She does not say that she has been told that she will be offered a house if she stops protesting, though there has been no written confirmation of this offer. She does not talk about what happened at the police stations, at the protests. After a moment, Renuka wipes away her tears with a tissue.

The journalist says, “thank you” in English and stands up. Her mobile phone on her lap, and which she had used to record Renuka’s words, drops on the floor.

The photographer who has accompanied her, laughs. “Did you drop it on purpose?”

He does not see the tears of this distraught woman. To him, the interview is routine. The crowd will disperse. The matter will soon disappear. He does not see that he too is a part of a political system where promises are often broken and people’s lives mean nothing. He does not see that this woman’s struggles are a part of unrecorded history.

They leave.

Renuka stays there for three full hours with the other protesters. Sky-high hotels, resorts, and luxury condominiums loom around her. Unlike in other condominium towers, here no towels hang over the balconies. Instead there are beautiful creepers and flowers trailing down. There are billboards outside displaying the glamour found inside these buildings, inviting customers to buy the remaining units. There are expensive cars, jeeps, and vans coming in and out of these buildings. Renuka wonders what it might mean to live in one of

those buildings. She is acrophobic and can't imagine being that high up, going out onto one of those balconies. She is grateful for her humble home back in Anuradhapura where she longs to be now, away from this protest that seems so futile. The pavement is cemented with coloured bricks. There are zigzag patterns on it. Here, things are in order, Renuka thinks. Even the roads leading to the sky-high buildings are clean, smooth, and curve well. The shrubs by the side of the roads leading to the hotels are trimmed. From where Renuka is seated, she can see a man in a white uniform holding open car doors and carrying bags for visitors.

A woman next to her has unfurled a purple umbrella and she holds it over Renuka and Chathu too. Renuka's water bottle is empty. Mr. Dias hands her another. They all wait, holding banners. Some are now seated on the pavement. The coconut trees behind them sway lethargically. They are exhausted, the sun blinding them all. Some of the women wear sunglasses but Renuka doesn't. She is used to facing the sun. The gates to the Presidential Secretariat are closed and there are men milling about outside now. One man in a khaki uniform detaches himself from the group, crosses Galle Road and walks towards the silent protesters. He hands a letter to Renuka.

"Nona, take this." He is polite. His eyes are cast down. He begins to walk back towards the Secretariat, his heavy brown boots loud. Mr. Dias, who had fallen asleep on the pavement, wakes with a start. He stands up too suddenly, surprising everyone, and nearly tumbles forward. "What is your boss saying?" he shouts.

The officer glances at Mr. Dias as if he is familiar to him and says nothing. His silence is more powerful than the hooting of the vehicles that speed around them. He finally says, "Come tomorrow. You will get an answer. The big mahaththayas are busy now."

He leaves.

Renuka tears open the letter. It promises intervention. They must come tomorrow. Renuka holds Chathu closer to her. She sighs and turns her back on the Presidential Secretariat for a moment, gazing at the sea in the distance. She was once a schoolgirl who used to jump into a pond and pluck lotuses in the morning. Now she feels like one of those browned, faded lotuses she used to pass over.

Renuka feels a hand on her shoulder. She turns to find Shyamalie, a friend of Mr. Dias. "It's alright. We're there for you," she says. Chathu, who is happy they have stood up, reaches out and grasps the finger Shyamalie offers her, grinning. She does not know that her mother is far from feeling relieved. Renuka suddenly feels light-headed and sits down hard on the ground. The world is spinning around her. Placing Chathu to a side, she lies back. The sun is now blinding, the sounds very loud around her.

She must have fainted because, the next thing she knows, she is lying with her head in Shyamalie's lap, the woman caressing her face. Another lady, in a multi-coloured lungi, sprinkles water on her.

Renuka is to spend the night at Shyamalie's house. A black jeep picks them up. Shyamalie holds the door open for her and Renuka and Chathu get in. The seat is off-white and cushion-y. There's a cold breeze from the air conditioning. Chathu hugs her, suddenly afraid, but Renuka feels she could fall asleep here. Yet, as they set off, she is aware of how out of place she is in this luxury jeep. When they reach Shyamalie's house, the driver presses a button and the gates open. Automatically. Renuka is awed. Shyamalie's house is huge and Renuka is nervous to go anywhere alone in it, afraid she will get lost.

The next day she is taken to the Presidential Secretariat. Mr. Dias and two others from the protest go with her and Shyamalie. They have to sit in the lobby on blue sofas for an hour before they are let in. Renuka has to hand in her ID card before they go through. The others hand over their IDs and mobile phones and they are all checked by security personnel. They are led through a wide staircase carpeted in red to an air-conditioned conference room, where they are instructed to sit around a table. There are microphones before each of them. Renuka holds Chathu close to her, afraid and claustrophobic. They wait there for half an hour. Chathu frets, about to cry, but Renuka manages to distract her by talking to her, telling her little stories.

Finally, a man in a white shirt, red tie and black suit enters. Everyone stands up. She is told that he is the Secretary to the President. Mr. Dias hands over the file in which he has been documenting Renuka's case. The Secretary, who is in his fifties, has tufts of grey hair. He takes his spectacles out of its blue case and reads the documents they give him. Then he removes his spectacles and, fiddling with it, he looks around at the people present.

“Renuka Jayabandu” he says.

“That’s me,” says Renuka. She did not intend to speak. The Secretary only said it for his own satisfaction: he knows she is the victim. There is a prolonged silence. The Secretary calls another officer to whom he whispers something. Then he looks at the other people present and looks specifically at Mr. Dias.

“Sir,” Mr. Dias begins, “this woman has been searching for her husband for the past hundred days. She has received threats and there are rumours that he is dead. She is not willing to accept that he will not come back. How can she anyway? She has a right to know the truth.” His voice is passionate. Renuka has never seen him speak so emphatically before.

“We’re told that Suren was abducted in a white van,” he continues in a sombre tone. “We have sufficient reasons to believe that government forces are involved. But we need to know why he was abducted and where he is. None of us can accept that he is dead. It must be noted that this is a grave offence. Whoever is behind this should be punished. There should be an explanation. The police have not investigated the matter. Can you believe this?”

The Secretary goes through the file again. As he does so, waiters enter with plates that contain a sandwich, a roll, and a patty on each of them. They place a plate by each guest.

The Secretary finally looks at them again. “I will ask the police to investigate. Meanwhile, I will send two officers from Colombo who will ensure that investigations are carried out fairly. When the perpetrators are found, I assure you, they will be held responsible before courts. But you must promise me that the protests will stop,” says the Secretary in an official, calm tone.

“I want to meet the President,” says Renuka. It takes tremendous will to say this.

“He has gone abroad, to Germany, for a meeting,” says the Secretary looking back at the file. Then he gestures towards the food and courteously asks them to have breakfast. He leaves the file on the table and, getting up, departs with a quick forced smile at them all. Renuka is disappointed. Mr. Dias should have checked if the President was in the country or not, she thinks.

The waiters bring tea. The tea is neither hot nor strong enough for Renuka. But she drinks it so as to avoid looking at the others present. “We’ll see what they’ll do,” says Mr. Dias. Renuka looks at the tea dregs in her cup.

Later, Shyamalie drops her off at the Fort Railway Station. She gets into her compartment and sits on a torn seat. Chathu is next to her, playing with her black bangle, living in her own world, while her mother swims like a fish into the wide-open mouth of a crocodile. On the journey, they pass brown fields, a reservoir which looks like it has black paint bobbling on the surface. The stench of the toilet behind them is unbearable. She wishes she could fall asleep on Chathu’s lap, just as the child has done on hers.

The next morning, she sleeps late, exhausted, and is woken by her neighbour, Maharala screaming, “Call!” Renuka knows it is from Mr. Dias. She knows what he will say. But she goes to her neighbour’s house anyway, without even washing her face.

The officials will look into it. They will call back. “Don’t lose hope,” he adds. They have taken one step ahead and yet are nowhere. She feels like she is drowning even more deeply in this swamp of ignorance. He says nothing further and the connection is lost.

Days pass like falling leaves that are snatched off branches by the wind and flung away. Renuka cannot stop them from flying away from her. Her husband’s shop provides low profits now. Her head is heavy all the time and lines have appeared around her eyes, the ones on her cheeks deepening.

Weeks pass and then she learns that the President is coming to Anuradhapura. He will go sightseeing – to Thuparamaya, Abhayagiri Viharaya, Jethavanaramaya, and Kuttam Pokuna. She decides she will meet him and tell him directly. She is not afraid. She visualises everything – how she will approach him, how she will make her plea. She writes a letter to give him. He will not forget her then.

On the day of his arrival, the roads in Anuradhapura are covered with posters welcoming the President. There are lines of flags stretching across the holy city. The city’s usual sleepy quality has disappeared and, instead, there is a celebratory atmosphere. Stalls have been set up selling mouth-watering *isso vadei* with a dried prawn placed on top of each and served hot with dried chilli

and slices of onion, and chilli chick peas, with small pieces of coconut, the dish so hot you run towards a water stall. Renuka walks past this celebration on the pathway leading to the stupas. It is crowded. She carries Chathu in her arms because she is afraid the girl might go missing in the crowd. There are army guards everywhere. The sight sends shivers up her body. Renuka finally reaches the steps leading to the Sri Mahabodhi, where a Bo tree sapling is planted, from the tree the Lord Buddha attained enlightenment under. After she spreads a polythene sheet on a step, she sits on the last step with the others, patiently awaiting the President. The staircase looms high, thronged with white figures carrying pink lotuses.

She waits silently. Chathu is used to being with her on the floor in crowded places and she knows how to behave. She plays with an imaginary friend rumpling the corners of a polythene sheet they sit on. Then everyone stands and Renuka leaps up too, craning her neck. She can't see the President. But she feels him approaching.

People surround the President, but also make way for him as he walks forward. Old women throw themselves forward to hug this man, to be blessed by him and to bless him. He clasps their hands in his. Mothers hold out their babies to him, so that he, the saviour of the country, can bless them. Cameramen tag along behind him, taking pictures of his every move. Monkeys clamber along the trees above, roused by the procession. The President's entourage moves forward towards the stairs that lead to the Mahabodhi.

Renuka takes her letter out of her bag and, carrying Chathu, moves through the gathering, pushing people aside. People thank him for reducing taxes, some reproach him for the increased burden. In the hullabaloo, their words are lost. Guards protect the President, their arms encircling him to keep back the crowd. Here, they do not use batons.

Renuka pushes past people and suddenly she finds herself directly in front of him, the President. For a moment, she feels disoriented to be in front of a real person, whom she knows only from his large images on billboards, on posters. He smiles at her and she finds herself going down on her knees, her hands reaching out to touch his feet. "Aney, sir, please find my husband." She tells her story fast, but she doubts he is listening. She hands over the letter. He says he will look into it. This is a stale phrase by now. She is firmly moved to a side

now and he continues on. Through the bodies pressing around him, she sees the letter still in his hand. It is like the petal of a flower that could slip through his fingers. She fears he will drop it. She wants him to pocket it. He doesn't. He does something worse. He gives it to a guard who pockets it. But it gets even worse. The Senior Superintendent of Anuradhapura, whom she had met before, is also in the entourage. He now whispers something in that guard's ear. The letter is given to him. Renuka screams. No one hears. The crowd surges forward.

She returns home with Chathu. That day she puts her to sleep and, by the kitchen fireplace, she weeps. She has never wept with this intensity before. Every bone and muscle in her feels cracked with grief.

That evening there is a letter at her door. It says that her husband is released. It asks her to bring a set of clothes for him and to meet him near his shop. She is ecstatic. She cannot believe what she reads and she calls out to all her friends and neighbours. The President has answered her plea. She will vote for them, this government. Over and over again.

When she arrives at the shop, it is closed. She wonders where Maharala is. He is supposed to be at the shop at this time of the day, while she takes a later shift. No wonder the profits are low. But soon Suren will be back and everything will return to normal.

A man is walking towards her and, even as she runs towards him, he falls on the ground. Renuka gasps as she draws near. It is not Suren. It is Kolu, the boy who was taken with Suren. Kolu stands up again unsteadily. There is blood on his forehead and in the corners of his mouth.

"Kolu, what happened?" He doesn't respond, but sways and she hurriedly puts Chathu down and slips his arm around her shoulder to support him.

"Akke, Suren ayya..." He coughs and spits blood. His toes have no nails, there is only pink flesh.

She stops a three-wheeler and carefully he climbs into it with Chathu. On the way to the hospital, he tells them that Suren and he were tortured.

"They beat us. Everyday. They poured hot water over us. They hammered us," he says.

Renuka tears up. Little Chathu, who doesn't understand the gravity of the situation and only sees that Kolu is dirty says, "Eee, you're filthy," in her childish voice.

Suddenly, he is fully alert as if aware for the first time of the child. "All because Suren ayya refused to give free fruit to the two policemen who came to our shop that day." He then tells her that he does not know what happened to Suren because he was separated from him days before.

Kolu was taken because he was a witness, but the target had been Suren. Kolu recounts how they were made to survive without food, how they were beaten, how Suren was finally taken away from him. Their abductors were always drunk and, in their stupor, they would remove the belts of their uniforms and beat Suren, while his arms were tied to the ceiling fan. Kolu was made to watch. They did it every day.

Above them, the clouds are white, heavy and thick, a different world where blood and torture and disappearances are unheard of. Kolu lolls against her shoulder, unconscious now. Renuka wishes she too could fall unconscious. Now she knows that the powerful cannot be trusted. But, she knows that Kolu's confession could be used to find the perpetrators and Suren himself. At first she thinks of informing Mr. Dias of Kolu's return, but then she feels sure that if she keeps silent, Suren's abductors will release him, just as they had released Kolu. She must believe this now. As the three-wheeler speeds on, she feels pulled even deeper into this terrible silence around Suren – it thickens all about her, and might just continue to thicken all the days of her life.

The next day she receives a letter from Mr. Dias. It contains a short article on her plight written by that journalist she spoke to at the protest. There is a picture of Renuka and Chathu. Renuka is wearing the leopard-print blouse Suren bought for her for their third anniversary. In the photograph, she sees Chathu's weariness; her own fatigue. The small photograph, with the protesters in the background, will make it seem like there were many people at the protest. But it had not been so.

Truth is never delivered in a pure form.

*Amra Ismail was born and bred in Colombo. She is a law student and a freelance journalist for a daily newspaper in Sri Lanka. Her story was inspired by the protests and events she has reported upon. Her main goal in the story is to capture the helplessness and the agony of the families of the disappeared, who often must live within the painful ambiguity of not knowing whether their loved ones are dead or alive.*

## *A Cup of Tea*

Yasu-e Karunaratne

“I don’t know Kosala, I know I said yes before, but now I’m having second thoughts about it,” Amma said. She was unpacking groceries and frowning at my father, as she moved rather clumsily around the kitchen, seven months pregnant. I snatched a juice box that she had left on the table counter and, after she nodded and smiled, pierced it with the straw and began slurping.

“No, we have to go,” Thatha said. “I promised the medical superintendent. The whole hospital staff is going, even the VOG. So if anything happens, we are all there for you.”

My father was the sole paediatrician for the entire Ampara District and, since it was the school holidays, my mother and I had come to join him for the month from Colombo. He had just returned to the quarters after a long day of work and now he began to help Amma unpack the groceries.

“It’s dangerous to go. Who knows what will happen?” she said after a moment.

“No, no, Aroshi, it’s completely safe. Karikalan, the LTTE leader for the area, welcomes us with open arms. He said he will assure our safety,” Thatha said, trying to jam all the meat and ice cream into the freezer while avoiding Amma’s gaze.

“Yes, that’s true, but..”

“And our medical clinic will save many lives. We have to go and help those Tamil people. It’s our duty as doctors.”

“I want to go. It’s just that we are taking Yasu-e with us and I’m pregnant, I’m just trying to be rational,” she said, placing her hand on her belly. “Do you really think it’s safe to take our six-year-old daughter into Tiger territory?”

“Let’s sleep on it.”

“But you all go early tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, it’s sad though that Mano couldn’t make it,” Thatha said trying to change the subject by talking about a colleague.

Amma laughed at his ruse. She lifted her hands and let them fall in acquiescence, “I think we’d better go to bed. We’ll need to get up early tomorrow.”

Thatha tried to suppress his grin of victory.

It was 2002, a period of ceasefire between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government. The Ampara hospital staff was using this opportunity to go into Tiger territory and provide medical facilities by setting up a makeshift clinic at a camp.

I lay in bed and images of the camp kept coming to me. I had heard of camps, just never been to one. My older cousins, who had attended guide camps, always said that a proper camp has a bonfire in the evening. I had gotten a packet of marshmallows from the supermarket, so that we could roast them at the camp. My mouth watered just thinking of those white and pink marshmallows melting on the stick. I hoped we would sing campfire songs around the fire, like they did in the cartoons. Tomorrow was going to be amazing.

We arrived in our jeep at the Ampara General Hospital at dawn. It was raining heavily. A full complement of doctors, nurses, matrons, and minor staff were waiting, ready for departure. The VOG (visiting Obstetrician & Gynaecologist) was there as Amma’s safety net. We started our journey. The terrain on the outskirts of Ampara was rough and bumpy, compared to the carpeted roads of Colombo. On either side of the road were long beds of paddy, small water-ways demarcating each square. The sun peeked through the clouds after the April shower, and gave the lush green fields a soft golden tinge. The glistening paddy fields seemed almost gelatinous. I wondered if I would sink if I sat in the middle of a field. A thicket of trees, at the far end of the fields, blocked our sight of what lay beyond.

“Aroshi, there is no need to worry,” the VOG assured Amma, noticing the growing anxiety on her face.

“I’m not worried at all,” Amma said, feigning composure. He sensed that it was not the journey she was afraid of, but the destination. “Kosala, it is Karikalan, no, who invited us?”

“Yes,” Thatha said, realising why the VOG had asked this. “He and his wife, who is a doctor, both have invited us. She is seriously concerned about the health of the village. I think it was her idea to have this medical clinic in the first place.” As he spoke, Thatha kept adjusting his spectacles, which bounced with each bump on the road.

“Who is this Karikalan anyway, can we really trust him?” asked another staff member.

“He is the Eastern-Wing political leader,” said Thatha.

“And it is a ceasefire now. It’s completely safe,” Amma said trying to convince herself.

The road was getting worse and Thatha had to use the 4-wheel drive. Then suddenly there was no more road. We had passed the government-controlled area. We travelled through a desolate stretch of harsh yellow land full of crevices, barren, with the occasional sight of Palmyra trees. The heat was intense, and bullets of sweat began to emerge on Amma’s back. The fractured terrain was not helping her anxiety. She squeezed her eyes shut at every bump.



We finally reached our destination: At a roadblock a couple of LTTE soldiers came to the jeep and asked Thatha for his ID and papers. They seemed so serious, not at all fun, like I had imagined people at a camp to be. I wondered if other camps had soldiers as well. My cousins hadn’t said anything about this. I couldn’t see the inside of the camp properly because of a gate ahead. But, as we approached, I excitedly started digging through my backpack for my marshmallows. My hand felt my soft bunny and a rusted toy train, but no marshmallows. I thought I had put them in my bag last night, but I hadn’t. In my dismay, I hadn’t noticed that we had entered the camp and now, as the jeep stopped, I stared around me at this most unusual camp. There were many people scurrying about, but there was no bonfire, let alone any tents.

The camp was not a camp as I had imagined but a village. Yet, it had no resemblance to any of the villages in Ampara. The people here lived in much poorer conditions. Children were skinnier, the houses were mud huts with cadjan-thatched roofs. The adults had faces contorted with trauma and grief. They seemed busy, but I could not understand what they were doing. They seemed to be running about carrying water, babies and other objects such as firewood and mammoties. A group of young boys, in faded, dishevelled clothes, were playing cricket using a paper ball and a mega Coke bottle for a bat. They were excited by the game and vibrant compared to the adults, yelling and cheering when they scored runs.

A cadre dressed in a green and white uniform, raised his hand, like a policeman, to stop the ambulances and trucks with supplies. When we got down from our vehicle, the cadre gave the Superintendent of the hospital instructions on how the medical clinic should be set up. His Sinhala was a bit odd, but understandable. The doctors, other staff members, and some soldiers from the camp began to set up the clinic in front of the village Kovil. My mother and I, along with extra pieces of baggage, were put in a hut. Though the hut was small, it was nice. The walls were made of smooth red mud that kept the interior cool. We had a simple meal of manioc and coconut shavings and then waited for my father. The lady who served our breakfast left the hut, saying that she would come back soon. She rooted under a bed and pulled out a rifle before she left. This made me wonder if she was a hunter. After a while, we became rather bored.

Amma made sure she had water bottles and some snacks in her handbag and then we set off to see the village. Though the village was crowded, it had an empty feeling to it. We passed some sunbathing cows, their bones jutting out from their soft leathery skin. A girl, who looked around my age, was sitting in front of her hut staring into the distance. She looked as bored as I was. I did not understand why she was sitting outside her hut in the hot sun and I wondered where her parents were. Maybe she was waiting for them. This puzzled me. Amma never would have left me home alone.

A few minutes into our journey I could see that Amma was tired. A lady, who saw Amma wiping her brow, asked us if we needed any help, her Sinhala also sounding strange, although fluent. She wore the striped uniform of a Tiger.

Her face was kind but her eyes seemed expressionless. She wore a silver beaded chain around her neck with a plastic pendent that had another blue powdery-looking pendent within it. A rather ugly necklace, I thought.

“How many more months?” she asked, indicating Amma’s stomach.

“Two,” Amma replied with a smile.

She led us to the shade of a tree and we sat down with her. Amma and she began talking about babies and families, laughing with each other as if they were long-lost friends.

“What is in that chain you’re wearing?” I asked, after a while, because I had been peering for some time at what I was realising was blue powder in the inner pendent.

Amma looked at me sternly, as if I had done something wrong.

The lady smiled. “The chain is for our protection.”

This confused me.

Amma looked away. I could feel her frown, though she was not looking at me.

“There is cyanide inside this plastic capsule,” she said holding the pendent out to us, wanting to normalise the situation, as she could see Amma was uncomfortable. “In case we are captured. It is our duty to protect confidential information at all costs.” She was looking earnestly at Amma who nodded, suddenly looking miserable.

I didn’t understand what she was saying. Maybe cyanide was some sort of medicine.

“We must get going,” Amma said and with a nod, a smile at the woman, she gestured for me to stand and then put her hand on my shoulder to leverage herself up. The woman jumped up and helped as well to get Amma to her feet.

For a moment, both women looked at each other and there was pain and regret on both their faces. As we walked away, Amma said nothing to me but I could tell I had made an error. I should not have asked about that pendent.

We approached the clinic and it was a war zone. There were doctors attending to both adults and children. I saw a soldier on a makeshift bed. A nurse removed clumsy, pus-covered stitches from his stomach. Blood spilled onto the already stained mattress. The soldier did not even flinch when the nurse sliced his stomach open. I had to turn away, feeling like I would vomit. A mother was carrying a howling baby. She spoke frantically in Tamil to the nurses. The nurses kept shaking their head, and the cries got louder and louder. I really wanted to leave the clinic. The cries were so loud. I really wanted to leave the whole camp. Why wouldn't that baby stop crying? When we finally found Thatha, he looked exasperated and defeated, his shirt soaked in sweat. He led us away from the clinic and took a long drink from the bottle of water Amma gave him.

"Aroshi, the situation here is terrible," he whispered to my mother as he handed back the bottle. "Almost all the children are anaemic, malnourished, or suffer from some sort of nutritional deficiency. I even had to refer a child with a congenital heart problem to the Kandy General Hospital. There are no facilities here. Nothing. Children are dying." He shook his head. "One medical clinic isn't enough."

"I wish we could do something more," Amma said touching his arm. "People, our people, shouldn't have to live like this. What can we do? The ceasefire, at least, gives us some hope. Change is underway. Things will change..."

"And if they don't? There are no doctors for the soldiers. They just inject antibiotics and pray for the best. People talk about the war and valorise the soldiers who risk their lives for them. But they have to see these LTTE cadres with their own eyes, to realise the destruction of war."

"Kosala," the VOG was walking towards us. "We are supposed to meet Karikalan at the school."

The school was in the centre of the village and, as we approached, I could hear children reciting their lesson. A cluster of trees surrounded the building. Students sat in the shade under trees, their teachers before them on stools. As we passed the classrooms, I saw that they were dim and cool. There were a series of Sri Lankan maps on the wall. Red and yellow lines demarcated the North and

a bit of the East as Eelam. The maps looked new in contrast to the dusty old classroom.

The hospital team were doing check-ups on the children in the back garden. On a desk that had been dragged out for their use, I saw a gum bottle, but it looked different from the ones you see in Colombo. I took a bit of gum on my hand, and it had the faint smell of rice. It smelt oddly spoilt, but I nevertheless spread it on my palm, fascinated at how soon it dried and peeled off like the shed-skin of a lizard.

A man wearing a white shirt and black trousers was now approaching the medical team. A gold bracelet gleamed on his wrist and shone bright against his dark skin. He was a hefty man, his moustache glossy with sweat. The medical team, on seeing him, stopped what they were doing and waited as if for inspection.

“Thank you so much for coming today. Our entire village is so grateful for your help,” he said in a booming voice as he came up to us. Though he had an accent when he spoke Sinhala, he sounded confident in the language. I heard a nurse next to me whisper to another, “Yes, yes that is Karikalan.”

I had heard his name so much today, he had become a mythical person. I couldn't believe that I was actually seeing him now.

“My wife and I work tirelessly for the health of this village. She's the paediatrician at Vanni, but she somehow makes time for the children of this village. We don't, however, have enough qualified doctors to look after the people of this village. Our soldiers often die from blood loss or infection,” Karikalan continued.

There was a soft buzz from the nurses of the medical team, when he said the word *soldiers*. A glance from the Superintendent silenced them. Karikalan removed his spectacles, wiped his brow, and furtively looked at his watch. Having regained his composure, he said, “I am happy we have entered into a period of peace. Whether it be short-term or long-term, we are all safe. Thank you again for coming here today. We hope to work with you again in the near future.”

The hospital team shook his hand and resumed their work. Karikalan took a chair and sat at the far end of the clinic.

I really wanted to leave now, I was sick of this camp. I could have been playing with my neighbours instead of being in this awful, boring place. I began to spin in a circle, while keeping the sole of one foot plunged in the sand, my toes drawing circles as I spun. I drew numerous circles till a Tiger lady finally noticed my boredom and suddenly picked me up.

“Who is this baby? What’s your name? Why are you in the sun?” she asked. I grinned, thoroughly enjoying the attention. She handed me a cup of tea. I usually detested tea. This tea, however, was warm and not overly sweet. As I swallowed, I felt its warmth flood my entire body. She squeezed my shoulders while I enjoyed the tea. I felt comfortable, sleepy even.

“Have you started school, baby?” she asked.

“Yes, I have been in school for a long time,” I said excitedly. “I’m in Grade One, we are learning multiplication next term, my teacher told us to learn the 2-times table before we return. Thatha bought me a poster with all the multiplications in the world. I’m going to learn it with athamma when I go home to Colombo.”

“You’re in grade one? What a big girl you are. And you’re already learning your times tables.” Then she smiled rather sadly and said more to herself than me, “My daughter would have been in grade one.” She shook herself and smiled at me. “I’ll tell you what, let’s play a game. Do you know how to play *batta*?”

“Yes, I love *batta*, I play it all the time at school, I’ll get a few rocks and come,” I said wriggling out of her arms and rushing away to gather some rocks for hopscotch. Then I drew the squares in the sand and beckoned her to join me. She came over and squatted by the squares. “You play, I’ll watch you,” she said.

“No, no, please, please, can you play with me,” I begged, clutching her blouse, “I just want to play something with a friend.”

“Okay, okay, let’s play,” she said with a smile.

She was quite good, but I won, or rather she let me win. Even though the sand was hot, I did not mind. Anyway, it was too hard to play *batta* with shoes on. She didn’t have her shoes on either. I wondered where she had kept them.

“I’m happy you are playing with me,” I said to her, as she jumped her way through the squares.

“I’m happy you are here with me,” she said, with a grin. She stroked my hair and collected all the stray pieces of my hair and held them back with a rubber band she took from one of her pockets. I felt more comfortable now in the heat.

After a while, I saw Amma approaching. When she got to us, she smiled at my new friend and then told me it was time to go.

“Amma,” I begged, “can we please stay a bit longer, please.” Now I wanted to stay overnight at the camp. We could sleep in the hut where we left all our baggage. The bed looked big enough for three.

“No Yasu, everyone is leaving now, we have to leave with them,” she said in her no-arguing voice. “Thank you for looking after her,” she added to my friend. “She can be very naughty sometimes.”

“It was no problem at all,” the woman said looking at me wistfully. “We had a lot of fun together. I had a lot of fun. Thank you for coming.”

“Our hospital must visit again soon,” Amma replied. “And a new hospital or clinic should be built here.”

“That would really help our village,” the woman said with a little smile, as if she didn’t believe this would ever really happen.

She drew me to her in a tight hug, then pulled away and looked at my face for a long moment. “Be a good girl and look after your Amma,” she said. Then she quickly walked away.

My mother and I went back to the clinic. As we came up to the team, the Medical Superintendent was promising Karikalan that they would visit again and help any time. I was so happy to hear this as it meant I would see my new friend again. The medical staff collected all their equipment and loaded it into the vehicles.

As we drove away, we saw a few sentinel Tiger boys. They stood in the twilight, uniforms hanging off their bony shoulders, AK47s in hand, rubber slippers on their elbows, and rubber slippers on their feet. I did not understand

why they wore two pairs of rubber slippers, making them look like robots. But, my lids were getting heavy and I was too weary to ask any more questions.



We drove back to Colombo at the end of the holiday and returned to our normal lives. One day my older cousin, who was my best friend at the time, was watching the news with me when suddenly there it was, the village my parents and I had gone to.

“We went there, we went there,” I cried excited. “I played batta with a new friend there and she gave me the best tea I have ever tasted!”

My cousin Dinasha stared at me aghast for a long moment. “You drank the Tiger’s tea?” she cried as if I was crazy. “They could have poisoned you!”

I stared at her in shock, in disbelief. “Those people, that lady, she was my *friend*.”

“Yasu,” she said with a superior wave of her hand. “You are too small to understand, they are just bombers and killers.”

She turned back to stare at the screen. The news had changed to the weather. She had not even gone to the camp, but yet she was so certain these people were bad. I felt a surge of anger.

“Dina, how are you so sure? Who told you? Have you met Tigers? Well, I have.”

“Yasu,” she said with a sigh, touching her temples. She closed her eyes and looked down. I hated when she did this, she always wanted to act like an adult. “Amma and Thatha told me they are all bad. Even in school, they tell us they are bad. That’s why we have to do those bomb drills, just in case they attack us. I’m sure you thought those bomb drills were just a game, but they are serious things. I can’t believe you drank their tea.”

I stared numbly at the TV and then at my cousin, recalling those drills and warnings at school. I had not, until this moment, made the connection between them and my new friend at the camp.

I am much older now, but I still do remember Dinasha's words. Since the war is over, all this is no longer a problem, we are told. We evidently all live in harmony now, without discrimination or racial hatred. But what was planted so early in all of us who have grown up during the war – can it really be gotten rid of that easily? I believe that race will not be contentious anymore only when there is trust between all the peoples of this country. I wonder if you, reader, believe this too.

*Yasu-e Karunaratne is a past pupil of Ladies' College and is awaiting state university entrance. She is currently a freelance journalist at the Daily Mirror. Her story is a memoir, and she has interviewed a few people (her parents and hospital staff who went to the camp) to corroborate her memories. The tea that the Tiger lady gave her is still her favourite cup of tea to date.*

## *Poems*

Sherwani Synon

### *The Other's Tongue*

“Do you believe you were right?”  
asked the man who  
died for his country.

“Yes, and I still do,”  
cried the man who died  
for his cause.

The silence resumed.

“You killed innocent people,”  
the first screamed, writhing in anger.

“And you killed my family!”  
the other retorted.

Time passed.

Over a tense game of carom,  
they spoke,  
now in the other's tongue  
about right and wrong,  
brothers of the same soil.

They agreed that now  
life is better lived  
than taken.

***Even the Odds***

It was an odd-numbered day,  
When an odd number of soldiers  
died in an ambush.

It was another odd day  
when terror took the streets  
lighting up everything in sight.  
Plunder and chaos  
to even out rage.

30-odd years later,  
we try to even out a dark past,  
an unresolved history.

***The Daily Prayer***

Every morning she hopes,  
Today will be the day.  
Dressed in blue to please the Gods,  
Sindoor on her forehead.

Another day, another protest.

In the sweltering heat,  
she summons tears at an order,  
hoping that today will be the day.

They shout slogans,  
bear pictures,  
people look but hardly see,  
ministers arrive and hush the crowd  
promising yet again that  
today will be the day.

Every evening,  
she prays before the Gods,  
that wherever he is,  
he finds peace today.

***A night in Kattankudy<sup>1</sup>***

A hundred and fifty devotees,  
were prostrate inside the mosques  
loving their God,  
when the men came  
splattering hatred  
everywhere.

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<sup>1</sup> The poem is inspired by the Kattankudy massacre in 1990 in which 147 men and boys were killed by the LTTE while they were attending evening prayers at two mosques.

Amidst bullet-riddled walls left untouched,  
to remind us of those who were lost,  
men still gather  
at the sound of adhan<sup>2</sup>  
to thank God  
for yet another day.

“Home,” we call  
this blood-soaked soil,  
to which  
we belong.

*Sherwani Synon is a Sri Lankan Malay who comes from a media background, having worked at several newspapers and an advertising agency. While she has a love-hate relationship with writing, she enjoys writing poetry the most.*

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2 Call to prayer

***Pressed Between Pages –  
A Family, a Country, and a Bo Leaf***

Sindhuri Nandhakumar

When I was seven, my father and I paid a visit to a Bo tree. It was late evening, with a little bit of sunlight still left in the day. The Kandy Lake emanated a pungent odour that we had grown accustomed to.

Standing in the shade of the enormous tree, Appa picked up a leaf and showed it to me; he pointed out the veins, the thin sharp tip. The leaf looked tiny against his big hands. “All Bo leaves are heart-shaped,” he said. “They are holy leaves.”

I looked around at the crowd milling outside the temple where the tree had been planted. Pilgrims, mostly dressed in white, sported pious looks as they walked about bargaining with vendors. I was inclined to agree with Appa – the place did have a holy air to it, but I was still curious.

“Holy to whom?” I asked.

He looked at me blankly, as if he didn’t understand how I didn’t know the answer already. “To the Buddhists,” he responded.

“Why?”

“Lord Buddha attained enlightenment under a Bo tree,” he said, looking up at the canopy.

“This tree?” I knew very little about Lord Buddha. At school, during Religion class, I was packed off with the other Hindu children to a different classroom where our teacher, Ms. Selvapriya, droned on about the battle of Lanka and the bridge that Hanuman built from Jaffna to South India. When we met the Sinhalese-medium girls during PE class, we would exchange notes – the Hindu girls leapt in the air and recreated the epic struggles from the Ramayana, while the Buddhist girls demonstrated to us how peaceful Lord Buddha had looked as he sat under a tree and meditated. Apparently, after he sat under the tree,

something magical had happened to him, and now we made colourful lanterns for Vesak to celebrate. But, I still didn't understand how a man could have meditated so peacefully under *this* tree, surrounded by the sickly sweet smell of pigeon shit and the din of vendors and pilgrims. I said as much to Appa.

"No, not this one, a tree like this, somewhere in India or Nepal I think." Appa was still wearing his soda bottle glasses that he wore when he was at work. His shirt sleeves were rolled up. He looked a little tired. I waited for him to say something more, but he was still looking at the tree. Maybe he was checking to see if there was enough shade for him to sit under it and attain enlightenment. "If he does that," I thought to myself, "I'll have to stand by his side and shoo away the pigeons. Maybe I could also hold up a sign that said: "Please be quiet, Enlightenment in progress."

A better idea, I decided, would be to uproot the tree and take it home with us to a quieter neighbourhood, farther away from the Kandy Lake. Farther away also from the bomb that had exploded at the Temple last week, early one morning. When I woke up that morning, my mother told me people had been killed.

"How many?"

"Not sure, some are still in hospital, but I think about twenty people."

I don't know if I knew the word then, but now I know that I felt *guilty* about those twenty people and about sleeping through the explosion. Amma and Appa had been awake and had heard it. They had thought it was somebody using up the extra firecrackers from the New Year's Eve celebrations.

"But Paru, what difference would it have made if you were awake?" Appa wanted to know, after my eyes had started brimming with tears at breakfast that morning.

"Appa, what if I was awake, and then I asked you to take me to the Maligawa so we could buy flowers, and then we went, and I was eating a banana, and then the banana peel fell on the floor, and the suicide bomber walked on it, and slipped and fell? All those people wouldn't have died, would they?"

"But Paru, you hate bananas," Arjun, my older brother, offered. Arjun was twelve and had inherited my mother's sarcasm along with her lean frame.

“It doesn’t matter if I hate bananas or not,” I retorted angrily.

When the bomb went off, Amamma, my mother’s mother, was visiting us from India. She was a fat woman who ate a lot of rice and complained a lot too. She generally didn’t like leaving Trichy, the small Indian city where she had lived most of her life. According to her, Sri Lanka was too clean, too quiet, and the people were unsettlingly friendly.

That day of the fateful bomb blast, Amamma caught me crying in the bathroom. She had come looking for me, slurping Fanta through a straw, her tongue painted orange. When she forced a reason out of me, I told her that it was because I was feeling sad about the bomb. In response, Amamma told me that I was being unnecessarily dramatic.

“You think things are bad now, no way,” she said, leading me to the living room where she sat down on the couch, the other hand nursing the Fanta bottle. “They were worse before. I came in ‘83 with your grandfather for a business trip, and the terrorists, silly fools, went and killed a few soldiers. That’s it. Story finished. The mobs went crazy. They went looking for Tamils everywhere.”

She paused, took a sip of the Fanta, never taking her eyes off me.

“We were staying with some business friends in Colombo. Tamil people. We all hid in this small opening in the roof, suffocating. The owners of the house had a son, about your age I think, six or seven. The boy had diarrhoea. We were so afraid that he would fart loudly and the rioters would hear. Luckily he didn’t fart, but he shat throughout. The smell was unbearable. I still feel like vomiting when I think about it. Kadavuley.” She shook her head and took another sip of the Fanta.

After a moment, she continued. “The mobs came, took all the jewellery, burned the furniture, and left. With the greatest difficulty, we got on the next flight to India. I never thought I would be back. But anyway, this bomb in the temple and all are very small things. Stop worrying about it, child.”

But I couldn’t stop worrying. I refused to go to school for an entire week after the bomb blast. To get to school, the van that picked me up in the morning had to go around the Kandy Lake, past the Maligawa, and onward, through the tunnel at Anniewatte. I didn’t tell my parents why I didn’t want to go to school. Instead, I feigned sickness.

In the morning, when Amma knocked on the bathroom door, telling me that the school van was here, I said, “I’m sorry, Amma. I have a really bad stomach ache. I feel like mosquitoes are biting me from the inside. I won’t be able to go to school today.”

My mother, never having heard a stomach ache described in such fashion, hastened to take me to the doctor who, after a brief inspection, pronounced perfect health and sent us back home. Of my parents, it was Amma who I was more afraid of. She was stern, but not unpleasant. She was great fun at games and helped me with all my school projects, but she sometimes didn’t like it when I shared my thoughts with her. She would often say, “You talk like a professor, Paru. You need to stop thinking so much at such a young age.”

Exasperated by my insistence that I was, in fact, very sick, Amma sent me to my room with no lunch. “The best cure for a stomach ache is nothing. Except Gripe Water. You want some Gripe Water?”

Shaking my head, I went to my room, drew the curtains, turned off the lights and got into bed. I stared at the ceiling. What had those people been thinking about in the second before they died? Did they realise that they were getting killed? Was it good luck to die in a temple? I stared unblinkingly at the ceiling. Arjun and I would often play this game where we would stare at each other without blinking. I would usually be the one to lose, unable to tolerate the stinging pain and the tears that followed. But this time, there were no tears. I just stared.

There was a soft knock and Appa opened the door. He came to my bed, his silhouette looming over me. He looked down at me for a moment, his face grave with what I thought was concern for my mystery stomach ache, and then he sat down beside me.

“Patties, tell me what’s wrong?”

The terms of endearment my father used for me were the names of food and I liked that.

If not patties, Appa would call me “my little chopsuey” or my “beautiful mackerel.” The mackerel was an oily fish that was poached and sold in cans. There was nothing beautiful about it, but it did taste good in a tomato curry,

with some pol sambol. Appa also called me pol sambol, which I quite liked and often enjoyed with bread from the local bakery.

Thinking of all this food had made me hungry. I wished I could have some mackerel curry and pol sambol now.

Appa sighed softly when I didn't respond. "What's wrong, Paru?"

I knew I had to tell him. It felt like one of the elephants from the Maligawa was sitting on my chest.

"Appa," I started, "You know that bomb at the Maligawa?"

"Yes," his voice had become grave.

"I'm afraid to go past it, Appa. What if something happens?"

"Something like what?" he asked, his brows furrowed as he leaned closer towards me. He looked concerned.

"Another bomb?"

He was silent. He looked at me intently. After a few minutes, he said, "Come with me."

We got into his 1990 Toyota station wagon and drove, winding past the foul lake to the outer perimeters of the Dalada Maligawa, the Temple of the Tooth Relic, where a tooth of the Buddha was purportedly housed. He parked under a tree and opened the door for me. He ushered me to the Bo Tree standing at the entrance to the temple.

Now, while pilgrims purchased lotus flowers and other accoutrements to enhance their prayers, my father showed me the veins of the Bo leaf. He traced the heart shape of the leaf on my palm. He explained to me that Lord Buddha hadn't sat under this particular tree and that he hadn't, in fact, been Sinhalese.

He took out his handkerchief and wiped the dust off of the leaf.

"To be honest, my little mackerel, I am not sure why I am showing you this leaf or this tree. But, you know, somebody sat under a tree like this and closed his eyes, and after months or years – I am not sure, we can check the encyclopaedia when we get home – something happened to him. And two

thousand years later, people are still talking about him. And doing all kinds of things in his name. He must have been a special man.”

“So why would they bomb his tooth?” I asked. Now I was enraged on the Buddha’s behalf.

“I don’t think they necessarily wanted to destroy his tooth. It’s more about what it stands for. It’s a complicated story, mackerel. It’s a fight between the Tamil Tigers and the government. Bombing this place is like bombing an idea. And despite your youth, you have been affected by this display of violence. You’re not sick, little Patties. You’re overwhelmed.”

I nodded my head casually even though I had no idea what he was talking about. He must have noticed my lack of comprehension because he knelt down beside me and cupped my face with his hands.

“It’s like how your body remains and you’re alive, but a small part of you is dead because something you believed in is dead.”

“I’m not dead,” I responded indignantly, miffed that he couldn’t see how alive I was even though I was standing right there, in front of him.

“I know,” he said, still looking intently at me. “Of course you’re not. I’m sorry.”

We sat under the tree and watched dusk grow into night. The flower and lamp vendors started packing up their wares to go home, and the pilgrims piled back into their buses and vans. As we sat watching, the day came to an end, and my stomach rumbled loudly. Appa laughed and got up. He carried me in his arms and walked towards the car, my limbs hanging awkwardly, my 7-year-old body no longer small enough to fit neatly around his waist.

In the car, while we waited for a traffic light to turn green, Appa turned to me. “I am sorry. I didn’t mean to say that you were dead. All I wanted to say is, sometimes things happen and they are so outside of the world that we were created in. Your mother and I have raised you and Arjun to believe that violence is not okay, that we should love everyone, however annoying they are – even your grandmother. And, when something like this happens, our world breaks a little. In a way, Amma and I have cheated you by protecting you like this.

But this is war, Parvati. This is the Tamils and the Sinhalese fighting with each other.”

“We are Tamil, right?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“So, are we angry with the Sinhalese?” I felt like I had to know right away.

He looked straight ahead at the road. “We’re tired,” he said after a pause.

“Of what?”

“Of what’s happening. Your mother keeps telling me that we should move to India, that your grandmother has a big house where we can live. I don’t want to go. Not because your grandmother is annoying,” he smiled apologetically, “But because I want you to live in this country when it’s not at war. It can be very nice then. I don’t want to take you away so that you forget what it’s like to grow up here. You’ll never have these memories if you don’t live here.”

I struggled to understand this. My father’s words were what my mother called, “Poetic Notions and Abstract Thoughts.”

“If the man didn’t have his head in the clouds, maybe we would have some more money,” she would often complain.

But I liked it when his head was in the clouds. When he talked like he was doing now, I loved him even more. It was a love that hurt in my chest. I wanted to *prove Appa right*, that he had done the right thing by not taking his family and fleeing to the big Indian house that Amamma boasted about. I wasn’t sure how I was going to prove it, but I decided to start thinking of ways to do so.

After a brief stop at the Devon Bakery to assuage my hunger with a patty and a strawberry ice cream cone, we wound past the lake, singing along to the Sooriyan FM Top 10 tunes, our Corolla puttering along. When we got home, we checked the first volume of our encyclopaedia for the entry under “Buddha.” After reading all about the noble man, I turned to Appa, feeling more relieved. Surely, no Tamil could be cruel enough to fight with such peaceful Buddhists?

And no follower of Buddha would do anything cruel to anybody? I felt a lot calmer. Things would be okay tomorrow.

I hugged Appa. “Thank you,” I said before getting up to go eat pol sambol and bread for dinner.

“One minute, Paru.” Appa gave me the Bo leaf that he had picked up outside the temple. “You can keep this. Look at it every time you are sad or angry or confused. Just remember – we’re not sure exactly how or why, but a man sat under a tree like this and today people are worshipping him and meditating with his image in their minds. If he could have been so peaceful, then maybe we can too, someday.”

He gestured to me. I slid it inside the encyclopaedia and he shut the book.

My stomach ache cured by my father, I ate half a loaf of bread at dinner.



I have never shared this memory of Appa with anybody. When the Trinity College Alumni Society called our home and asked us for a “nice” article about Appa to commemorate his first death anniversary, I hung up on them. When they called again, I told them that they had called the wrong number and that there was nobody called Murali who had ever lived in this house.

On the day that he was killed, ten years after the Tigers had tried to bomb the Buddha’s tooth, Appa had gone to Colombo on the morning train. For work, he said. A meeting with so-and-so. He seemed excited about the prospect of meeting this man, who he said might help lift the family’s textile business out of the financial troubles it was in. The night before, he’d had a lot to drink. This wasn’t an unusual occurrence. Over the past ten years, he had become much more dependent on alcohol. When he drank, his eyes got glassy and he cocked his head to the side when talking. As he licked his fingers and burped after eating, I would often whisper to Arjun that he looked like a fish with Down syndrome.

I didn't like saying mean things about Appa, but he did in fact, look strange. His cheeks were bloated. These days, he barely went to work. Instead, he slept for most of the day or played Solitaire on our old desktop computer. At periodic intervals, we would hear the creak of the back door being opened as Appa let himself into the backyard to smoke.

For many years, I never understood why my father's life had unravelled in the manner that it did. He was a man who had everything he wished for. His lack of zealous ambition and his tendency towards contentment should have assured him a happy, if not wildly exciting, life. He was sensitive, he was caring, he was loving.

The first time I remember him being drunk was when I was 13. Amma, Arjun, and I had just returned from Trichy after visiting Ammamma. Appa sat down at the dinner table that night, his eyes glassy and his speech slurring. "It's so great to have you back," he said, getting up mid-dinner to hug both Arjun and me for the fifth time. "One month. Can you believe your mother took you away for one whole month?"

My mother bristled and pointedly avoided making eye contact with Appa. Instead, after dinner, she busied herself with cleaning the house, giving brusque instructions to the maid to sweep and re-sweep the floors. That night, Appa and Amma didn't sleep in the same room. Instead, Appa took up residence in the guest room, where he slept for the rest of his life.

After that day, my parents barely talked to each other. Or rather, my mother barely talked to my father. At the few social gatherings that our family went to, Amma made a half-hearted attempt to be nice to Appa, but after a few months, she stopped going out with him. Instead of asking Appa for money to pay our school fees, Amma started pawning her jewellery – an inheritance from her parents when she got married. I noticed that the bangles on her hands kept disappearing until she had only one thin pair of gold bracelets. She was stoic, but it was clear from her attitude and unspoken words that there was only one cause for her fall from socioeconomic privilege and grace – my father.

I didn't understand what had happened when we were away in India – had he fallen in love with somebody else? That was hardly likely – he still looked at Amma like she was the most interesting person in the world, even if she did

not deign to notice him. Where was this inexplicable abyss of addiction and misery coming from? Weren't we good enough for him? Arjun and I studied hard at school, tried to excel at activities like swimming and running that we were genetically ill-equipped to succeed at, all so that we could make our father proud, and our mother more congratulatory of us.

The night before he died, Appa slurred at the dinner table about how proud he was of Arjun for managing to fund his own education through sheer brilliance of intellect. Arjun was a month away from leaving for Princeton, most of his education paid for by a generous university grant. His acceptance by an American university had stunned his school administration – as no one had thought he was that bright. When Arjun asked his principal to fill out a form to send with his application, the principal, a dull-witted man, had asked him what GPA was. Arjun's response had been, "Just write four point zero, Sir."

Appa turned to me, "Paru, you are not far behind. You will also go to America one day and join your brother. What will you study, Paru? Do you want to study geology, geography?"

"None of those things," I responded curtly. Appa never seemed to remember my interests anymore. At thirteen, I had decided I wanted to become a political scientist. I wanted to be an expert on the way countries ran themselves, maybe even lending my wealth of knowledge and wisdom to the Sri Lankan government so that they could end the war. But Appa didn't know all of that, because he never asked me about myself any more.

"Maybe when you go to America, your mother will also go with you. Leave me here." Amma ignored him and went to the kitchen to get more roti. It was hard for me to imagine Amma in America. Even though she complained about how much she missed India, I knew that she liked Kandy more than Trichy. She enjoyed going to the bakery to buy rolls and patties for evening tea, taking a stroll around the lake with her girlfriends, going to Sigiriya and Dambulla with her Rotary group.

"I'll be all alone here," Appa droned on.

"Shut the fuck up," I wanted to say. I rolled the word around my tongue, "fuck fuck fuck," willing it to hit Appa like a slap. I was enraged at the man that he had allowed himself to become.

Amma returned with the roti and we ate in silence for a while, Appa chewing his chicken loudly. Then he started again: “I don’t think you all realise how much I love you. I would do anything for you children. Tomorrow, I am sure the meeting will go well. And then, I will be able to do everything to keep you happy. Your mother will finally be happy – maybe she won’t regret marrying me.” He cast a sideways glance at Amma, but she had already risen to wash her hand, a half-eaten roti still on her plate.

“Your mother came from a rich family, you know?” Appa continued. “She was raised like a princess, but then she had to marry a pauper like me. Poor Amma.” Appa sighed, a burp rising through his chest as he slumped backwards in his chair.

Arjun rolled his eyes and got up to leave, another half-eaten roti on his plate. I turned to Appa, the anger within me too much to stay inside my body.

“Fuck you,” I said to him. And then as an afterthought, I added, “Appa,” to be sure that he knew I was talking to him, and not Arjun.

There was silence. Arjun turned and looked at me with shocked eyes. We never swore at our parents.

Finally, Appa spoke. “What did you say?”

“I said, fuck you,” I responded. “You heard me – fuck you, fuck you, fuck you. I hate you. I hate the way you drink so much. I hate how messily and loudly you eat when you’re drunk, and how you just whine all the time. I hate you, I hate you. I wish you were not my father. I wish Amma would divorce you so that we don’t have to live with you anymore.”

Amma was back in the dining room by this time, and she tugged at my arm. “Paru, enough. Wash your hands and go to sleep.”

I ignored her, defiantly staring at my father who was looking at me with his mouth open. There was food stuck in his beard. At that moment, I had no respect left in me for this man – my Appa, the man who had been the love of my life, the man who had helped me understand the complicated country that I lived in.

He rose from the table and walked menacingly towards me. I didn’t move.

“You hate me?” he asked me. His face was only inches away from mine and his breath smelled like a sour combination of alcohol, food, and stale cigarette smoke.

“Yes,” I said, turning my eyes away from him and looking up at the ceiling.

Before Amma or Arjun could say anything, Appa dashed to the kitchen and returned with a knife – the long kind that Amma used to slice the bread with. His bloodshot eyes wide with rage, he came towards me.

Amma screamed and pushed me. “Paru, please, please go to your room,” she cried.

“No, let him stab me,” I said, even though I was terrified. The hair on my arms was standing on end, and I couldn’t tell if my heart was beating slower or faster. The chicken curry rose up through my throat; I swallowed it and stared at Appa, unblinking.

Appa lunged forward at me, knife raised. Arjun jumped to pull him back and Amma also threw herself between us. I stood frozen, completely shocked. I felt Amma grab my arm and drag me to my room. Once inside, she bolted the door shut and sat down on my bed, her hands shaking.

Appa stood outside my room, hammering on the door, shouting, “Come, Paru, tell me what your problem is. Your mother wants a divorce? This is how she wants to ask me for one – through her daughter? Tell that woman to come out.”

But soon, he became quiet and after some time we heard loud snores outside my door. Arjun came out to the garden and knocked on my window. I opened it to see him standing outside with a box of Ferrero Rocher chocolates for me – my favourite. He had gone out to buy them for me. He passed them to me wordlessly, one by one, the box too big to fit through the grills on our windows.

That night, for the first time in twelve years, I peed my bed. When the warm liquid woke me up, I sighed loudly. I woke Amma up and we both stripped the bed of its sheets and put our pillows on the floor. Before we could go back to sleep, Amma said “It’s all his fault.” I turned on my side, away from her and told her that it wasn’t. It was *her* fault, for marrying him, for not stopping him from drinking, for not telling him to go to work, for not leaving him and

taking us with her when he became unrecognisable, for not preventing him from becoming so unrecognisable. Instead, she had built a life for herself with her friends and her meetings and tea parties – a world that had no place in it for her family – for Appa, Arjun, or me.

Where was the Appa who calmed my frazzled nerves with soothing words? Where was the man who had successfully cured himself of his smoking and drinking habits acquired during his college days? What did any of us do to make him pick up that first cigarette, after years of abstaining? I hadn't changed. I was still the same Paru who enjoyed drives around the lake with the windows down, in the same Toyota Corolla that Appa still drove. What had we done as a family to make him hate his life so much?

Early next morning, when I opened the door, I found Appa sleeping on the floor outside my room. At breakfast, he was sober, and all of us sombre. As he got in to the three-wheeler to go to the train station, Appa looked at us regretfully.

In the afternoon, he called me from Colombo. I ignored his call. I hated him for what he had done to our family. We weren't normal people anymore; I couldn't go to school and tell my friends, "Guess what happened yesterday," and then recount this anecdote. We had become abnormal, because of my father.

I was determined not to speak to him again. He called again, I cut the call. Two minutes later, there was another call. My phone rang for five seconds and, before I could cut the call, the phone stopped ringing.

After that, time moved in a very curious fashion. Not linear, not cyclical, but in a blotchy manner – with certain moments speeding up, others slowing down to a viscous pace and even others slipping through my memories like tea through a strainer.

He was killed that day. In a bomb blast. At the train station in Colombo, where he was supposed to take the afternoon train back to Kandy. A part of me died when I heard the news, accompanying my father to whatever after-life he had been carried away to by the explosion.

Appa's body was brought to Kandy in a hearse that moved painfully slowly even by hearse standards. Arjun performed the last rites that only a son could

perform, such as pressing the button in the electric crematorium. Nobody asked me if I wanted to do the honours. None of us spoke to each other – Amma, Arjun, nor I. We were too shocked.

Relatives fussed over the widow's rituals. They asked Amma for her grandest kanjivaram pattu saree and draped it on her. They slid two dozen red glass bangles on to her wrists, adorned her hair with a string of jasmine flowers, and smeared bright red *kum kum* on her forehead. And then, in one swift movement, the pack of ladies lunged at her, two pulling the saree off her body, one grabbing the flowers off her hair, yet another pair smashing her hands against each other, breaking the bangles and finally, one more yanking off the matrimonial cord – the thaali - from around Amma's neck. Finally, my grandmother tossed her a white saree and asked her to get changed.

When everybody cleared the room, I went to Amma and tried to hug her. She pushed me away as she wiped the blood on her wrists – a glass bangle had scratched her.

“Doesn't matter if he's dead or alive,” she said, looking away from me as she unhooked her saree blouse. “He has destroyed my life.”

Amma's bitterness stung me. Even though I had said worse things to Appa a couple of days ago, I didn't understand how Amma could be so angry at a man who was dead and gone forever from our lives. It seemed almost unfair, considering that he wasn't there to defend himself against her barbed comments.

That evening, after Appa's body was cremated, I went to the Bo tree and sat under it. It still smelled like pigeon shit and there were people still buying lotus flowers. How could my life have changed so quickly when everything else seemed unchanged? We were even less normal than we had been before his death. It was as if the universe was telling us, “You fucked up. You were never good enough. Even the terrorists seem to think so. That's why they took a break from fighting for Eelam to teach you a lesson.”

Appa may have been full of shit when he was drunk, but he was right in predicting that I would follow Arjun to America. This time, my principal knew better than to put “Four point zero” under “GPA” on the application form. Johns Hopkins wasn't Princeton, but I was still proud of myself for having made it there. When my freshman-year roommate asked me what my father did,

I said, “Textiles. Family business.” When she asked if he had dropped me at university, I said, “No. Flights are too expensive.” I talked about him like a living man.

At Hopkins, I didn’t date. I found the activity to be tiresome, because each dinner or coffee chat invariably involved “The Family Questions.” Every time a man asked me to “Tell me about yourself,” I wanted to put my hand over his mouth and say, “I don’t think you are strong enough to bear it if I tell you.” Sex was easier – our mouths could be kept busy doing other things besides discussing our painful lives.

I asked a therapist I briefly saw at university if I could ever love my father - a man who was so complicated, made even more complicated by his death. A man who was unrecognisable in his rage and sorrow when he was drunk, a man so gentle in his sobriety that I felt sorry for him; a man full of lively anecdotes from his youth, but who had stopped generating those anecdotes in his later life, jaded and disillusioned. By what, I wasn’t sure.

“You can,” the therapist had told me. “You always loved him. Maybe you can love him without the anger now that he’s gone.”

But it was not that easy.

When I left America to come back to Sri Lanka, all I had was a degree and a suitcase filled with academic books about comparative politics, the Arab Spring, the Iranian revolution and various case studies for post conflict reconciliation. I wasn’t leaving behind a lover or any friends. Only professors who smiled at me formally and told me I should come back for a PhD after gaining some experience, “working in the field.” Even as they shook my hand good bye, I knew that they saw me as only their student – not as a friend or confidante. Unlike Arjun, I had decided to move back to Sri Lanka, and my classmates cheered my decision to work at a peace-building NGO. They thought it was very exotic.

By the time I had decided that I would be moving back, Amma had decided that she wanted to move to India. She wanted to go back home and spend more time with her now ailing mother. I found my mother to be the same person I had left. She was still hosting elaborate tea parties for her Rotary friends, living a comfortable life with money bestowed on her monthly by Amamma, and whatever extra support Arjun was providing from his engineering income in

America. I was almost relieved by her decision to leave to India. I wouldn't have to visit her during weekends. We had little to say to each other now anyway. It was decided that we would sell my childhood home in Kandy, since I would be living in Colombo.

Amma wanted to donate everything in the house. Ammamma, despite her ailing condition, was well enough to travel to Sri Lanka to help with the packing. She too encouraged Amma to leave everything behind. "There's no shortage for things in India. And we already have everything. Leave this all behind."

As I was helping her clear things out, I found the large encyclopaedia set that Appa bought for Arjun and me when I was in Grade 2. I opened the first volume to look for the leaf of the Bo tree, and it was still there, by the entry for "Buddha". There were two other Bo leaves next to it – delicate and fragile. Appa must have put them there. But then, within the pages of the volume, I found something else: a prescription from nine years before Appa died, in the familiar handwriting of Mr. Navodhan, our family doctor. He advised my father in forthright medical language to take the prescribed medication once a day. Under "Condition," he had written, "Major Depressive Disorder (Depression)". Under "Cause" he had written, "Stress caused by marital discord."

I stared at the pages stunned. Depression was a word I had learned at university, where students committed suicide at surprisingly frequent rates. Why had Appa been depressed? And why had he never told me?

When I had recovered from the shock, I went looking for Amma. She was kneeling over a large trunk putting things into it. Ammamma stood over her, sipping a Fanta, her favourite drink. I waved the paper in front of Amma and cried, "What is this note? What marital discord? Why was he on pills for it?"

Amma took the paper from me and sat back on her haunches. Slowly, she looked up at me. Ammamma had stopped slurping her Fanta and was holding the bottle protectively against her stomach. "I wanted to leave him, Paru. I... I didn't like this country." She stopped, fiddling with her sari pallu.

"Amma," I said, now frustrated. "What does that have to do with *this*?" I asked, gesturing at the paper in her hands.

"I wasn't happy – I grew up in a wealthy family in Trichy, and it was difficult for me to adjust to life here. I thought he was going to turn his family business

into an empire, but he didn't. All these army and police fellows would come to your father's shop and ask for bribes, threatening to arrest him for being Tamil. He didn't leave, even though I begged him to. He kept telling me that the war would never come to Kandy, but when they bombed the Maligawa, I knew that it had already come here. It was everywhere. I asked for a divorce."

"When?"

She looked at me quizzically. "When what?"

"When did you ask him for a divorce?"

"The first time I asked him was right after the bomb blast, but he promised me that everything would be okay, that the war would end soon. That the business would make more money." She sighed. "I believed him. But nothing changed, not this stupid country, not your father. I asked him again a few years later, and he begged me to stay. I took you and Arjun and went to India for a month. After that, we never talked about it." Amma began to cry softly.

"Did you know about this?" I gestured at the prescription.

"Yes, he told me. But what is depression, Paru? Just because he was depressed, was it okay for him to treat his family the way he did?" Amma looked away from me.

I slowly sat down on my parents' bed. "Why didn't you leave him after that?"

"He would have died without us. Without you and Arjun."

Ammamma recommenced sipping her Fanta. "Sooner or later, he had to die anyway."

I wanted to punch Amamma in the face. I wanted to punch Amma too. My parents had created Arjun and me out of a mess of a marriage. They had brought us into the world even though they weren't sure of their own ability to live amicably, if not lovingly, with each other. I know they didn't mean to, but they had broken me with their arguments and their heartache. When he took me to that stupid Bo tree and told me that things would be okay even if they didn't make sense, I had foolishly and naively believed him. I had believed that

our family was beautiful, that life was beautiful. I had also foolishly and naively believed that studying something as silly as political science would allow me to help a country come out of its conflict days. I wanted to laugh at myself – at my foolishness, and at the myths and fictions I had allowed myself to believe.

But I also wanted to cry, because if there was anybody in the world who could have convinced me that I was being too pessimistic and bitter, anybody who could have reassured me that things would, in fact, be okay, it would have been Appa. But the man was gone, bombed away by a conflict larger than our individual lives. And part of him was gone even before he died. Dr. Navodhan had understood that about him before any of us had. He had been sick. He had needed us to cure him.

Amma and I dragged a heavy trunk out to the lawn and dropped it on the grass. Then, we stood there, waiting for the boys from Mendis Movers to come and take it to the old age home where my mother was donating her things.



It's been five years now since Amma moved to India. Neither she nor Arjun have come back to Sri Lanka in those five years. Excuses are offered aplenty – too busy, better shopping in India, why not meet somewhere new, like Singapore? The family hasn't taken a vacation in years, etc. What they don't want to say out loud, but what all of three of us know, is that they just don't want to come back to this country. Arjun would rather be in a country where people don't know how to pronounce his name, than be in a country that killed people of his race. He would rather be in a country that doesn't remind him of his father's disintegration.

Even though she misses her Rotary tea parties and walks around the lake, my mother would rather be in Trichy, visiting different temples with my still-living grandmother, praying away the memories of life in a country where she was, for the first time in her life, forced to see herself as a member of the minority. Praying away the memories of a husband who failed grandly in his desire to have a happy married life.

I, on the other hand, can be nowhere but here. Wherever I go in this world, I carry the heaviness of Appa with me. It's only when I am in Sri Lanka that I can dispel some of that heaviness because of the curious fact that tragedy is all around me, rather than just within me; my work in peace-building brings me into daily contact with it. When I sit under the Bo tree, as I do every time I am back in Kandy, my chest hurts, but it doesn't hurt as heavily as when I am anywhere else. I want it to continue hurting. Feeling that pain is the only thing that keeps me close to Appa. Sometimes I awake in a cold sweat, shaken by a nightmare in which I don't know what Appa looks like anymore. There have been times when I have wordlessly driven to Kandy in the middle of the night to sit under that tree, still in my pyjamas, just so I can hurt again – just so I can be with my best friend again.

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## *Un-Arranged Marriage*

Chamindri Liyange

Perched on the window seat, cradling my evening cup of tea in both hands, I look towards the horizon. I have always seen infinity in the mixture of white and grey clouds beyond the urban tree line. Dusk is fast approaching, the time my nostalgia usually sets in.

Ours was a storybook love story. I met him through a friend. At that point, there was nothing extraordinary about him. Sure, he was nice looking, tall, and broad-shouldered, with a shock of glossy black hair that was always falling over his forehead, but his personality didn't immediately grab me. He seemed too quiet, too boring. It was obvious to me that one of my friends was trying him on to see if he fitted her. I frankly didn't care; I was out having a good time. But slowly, as my friend withdrew her attention from him, I started liking the attention he was paying me.

“Care to dance...” “Shall I drop you home...”

His extraordinary qualities surfaced now. He seemed very self-contained for a Sri Lankan guy, not cloying or jealous. And what I had read as quiet and boring was actually this self-containment – a lack of desire to please or impress. I began to see that there was a real courtesy to him. He would often say to me, “You need help with anything, anytime you let me know, okay?” Unlike a lot of men, he wasn't intimidated by my ambition and would often say, “Wow, you're quite the girl ha, working and saving and spending your way... Independent. I like that.”

Then, as photos of the bunch of us who usually hung out started floating around, my girlfriends started asking about him wanting to be set up on dates with him. This really prickled my jealous bone. That's when I realised, “Hmmm... I might be losing more than a friend here.”

I set him up on the dates and prayed with all my heart that they wouldn't work out. I would call both parties the next day to find out how they felt and I breathed huge sighs of relief when they both said, "Nah, not for me."

I knew then that I was falling, slowly but surely. It felt beautiful and that's all that mattered. I didn't care whether the feeling was mutual or whether it was practical.

A few nights later, after no success with any of my friends, he called me and said, "Are you awake?" There was keenness, an anxiety in his voice that thrilled me, as if he was afraid I would have put the phone down before he had said his piece. "I have such a lot to tell you," he added before I could say anything.

We talked for a while about movies, families, religion, relationships and then he finally said, "Can I come and pick you up tomorrow evening?"

"Pick me up? You don't even have a bicycle," I replied cheekily.

"Na, I mean in a bus. So I can spend some time with you. I'll take you to dinner, ya?"

I was a young girl who had been brought up in a very traditional way. I believed romance only existed in novels and movies, so his words felt like a dream. I spluttered, "Sure."

It never occurred to me that my desperation was tangible.

Dinner at a quaint sea-front restaurant turned out to be a magical and romantic experience for me. The waves murmured as we talked, the soft light from the candles made his beautiful eyes luminous. Arjun was between jobs and was spending all his time dreaming about going to America to pursue the American dream. He spoke of this with such naivety, such boyish enthusiasm that I was charmed. He seemed fascinated and impressed that I had got into a university in the U.S. to study for my Masters in Psychology and was only waiting on my visa.

When I returned from the washroom and checked my purse for a tissue, I found the bill tucked into it. I was annoyed. "Such unmanliness from a wannabe Americano," I said rolling my eyes. He grinned naughtily and, sensing that

there was something else to the bill, I pulled it out and looked at the other side. He had written, "I love you forever." I looked up at him my eyes letting him know I felt the same way too.

I kept the bill in my purse to remind myself during my busy days that, whenever something went wrong, somewhere a few kilometres away was this man who would do anything for me, and for whom I was the world. His love for me increased my self-esteem. I believed this was mutual.

It became our custom to take long sunset walks on the beach. At the end, he would always stand behind me, his chest against my back and his chin resting on my head, both of us gazing into the far horizon, dreaming of a future together.

I, who had been independent for a long time, became dependent on this man.

I was 27; I thought I was unattractive, partly because I was dark-skinned. I had been told this my whole life by a culture that values fair-skinned women and sees them as more beautiful. Being swept off my feet by this charming boy-man quietened the deep fear and desperation I had carried around with me for so long, the fear that no one would love me. So I was quick to decide he was The One.

But it was not easy. He was Catholic and Tamil. We were divided not only by religion, but by race too. My family's personal tragedy complicated things further. When he asked me to marry him, I prevaricated, scared to say, "Yes." I had to first tell my mother. Amma was predictably furious when she found out I was thinking of marrying a Tamil.

"How can you?" she cried through gritted teeth. "After what they did to your father? And you're his only child."

"Amma, the LTTE killed him. Not the Tamils," I cried back, wringing my hand, pleading.

"Your father joined the army because he had principles. He believed in one united country. I'm not trying to be cruel, Nayana, but it's a question of being loyal to your father's beliefs."

But I was too blinded by Arjun's warmth and attention to pay any heed to her rationale about life-long beliefs and principles. My desperate desire for love,

from which I had suffered most of my life, long considering myself ugly and unlovable, trumped what now seemed to me my father's punishing ghost.

One reason I chose to marry Arjun was because he assured me our religious and racial differences would not be a problem for his family. We might be losing my family but he promised me we would be more than welcome in his. He said there were many inter-religious marriages in his extended family.

My decision meant I would be abandoning Amma. I was an only child. If I chose Arjun, I would not only be betraying my race, my religion, and my father, but also my mother. A mother who had toiled all her life to make a happy home for me. She had raised me to ease the suffering of others, the kind of suffering she herself had had to undergo when she lost my father. She had given me the ability to lead a humble, helpful, honest, and dignified life.

After I told my mother, I was anguished. To Arjun I said, "I wish things were as easy as you say, Arjun, but I can't leave Amma... I can't be that thoughtless." I began to weep, as I often did these days.

"Come on," he comforted me, "It's not like your mother is going to hate you and make you an outcast, ne? You're the only child. She'll come around slowly, trust me. I'll make sure of it."

The more we discussed it, the more I realised how much Arjun seemed to be motivated to make things work and that gave me a lot of confidence. Also my desire to be loved by a man blinded me. Arjun's charisma, and his persuasions became so convincing that all the logic in my head flew out the window. So when I said, "I want you more than anything. I will even put you ahead of my mother," I meant it wholeheartedly.

He was thrilled but, since the fruit was no longer forbidden and the race won, within a few weeks he had started to make frantic soul-searching monologues that drove me to panic. "We need to take a break," "I want to spend some time away from you," "I want to find myself," "You're better off without me," replaced the "I love yous" and "Hello darlings." I stayed consistent because I had committed to this path and I knew he was the one for me. "Arjun," I would say firmly, trying to hide my fear, "We are both in this now. We love each other.

I know you are frightened, but we need to see this through, especially if we need to get to the U.S. quickly.” This reassurance would always settle and calm him down.

But I was in for another surprise. One day when we met, he seemed quiet and moody and, after I had asked him over and over again what was wrong, he told that his father was insisting that I convert. This was because he was the only son and the carrier of the family lineage. He could not meet my eye as he said this.

I was stunned for a moment and then I burst out in rage, “How dare he say that? We’re not in the Stone Age for God’s sake! If I give up my religion I am going to lose who I am. Damn it, you’re intelligent. Can’t you see how crazy this is?”

The chase was once again on for Arjun. Now he assumed the role of the consistent one. He called me every day, every night until I thought to myself, “If this is the kind of love and care I can expect all the rest of my life, I’m willing to trade in some religious and cultural labels for it. He’s more worthy than the idea of religion and race that I rarely conform to, anyway.”

So I converted.

After my capitulation, things were wonderful between us. Arjun was the best of grooms. He was thoroughly involved in the wedding planning, working with me to choose my sari, the bridesmaids’ outfits, and single-handedly executing the plans for the gorgeous wedding cake because I was too stressed to care. Pebbles, one of my oldest schoolmates, who was my matron of honour, told me that her husband had said of my fiancé, “I have no worries about Nayana. Arjun is the most caring man I’ve ever seen and he is going to take care of her so well! Just look at the way he’s handling the wedding.”

It was a beautiful wedding. Surprisingly Amma, who like most of my other relatives had threatened to boycott the wedding, was there. She was the only one present from my family. This is when I realised how much she loved me. She had let go of her principles for me. When she came to the back of the church to witness my signing the registry, she was the first to embrace me. Both of us wept at being reconciled again.

Now looking back, I can see how selfish I was. I thought of no one but myself. I was so full of confidence and gusto that I had got the best man in the world.

Four months later, when I got my visa approved to go to America for my higher studies, things seemed fine. I went ahead with our mutually planned decision. I was to fly out first and Arjun would follow suit in a few weeks. My dreams of studying in America, our life there, gave wings to his own American dreams. We were still working as a team.

Unfortunately, fate has a funny way of not working out. His visa never got approved; he could never join me. I received this news with shock. Yet, once I had processed it, I was not about to give up on us. I worked through sleepless nights and around the clock balancing my studies with re-applying for his visa. But, it was all too much for me and I failed, both at getting the visa, and at doing well in my assignments.

I could not enjoy the world around me. Stepping out to do something fun with my fellow students was torture. I felt guilty if I went out to a bar or out to dance, or to a party at a fellow student's house. But I went nonetheless out of loneliness and also a desire to take in this American world I had seen in films and read about in books. Every day, I noticed with sadness the pairs of lovers walking about or carrying their groceries and talking to each other, the young families with kids hand in hand. I wished Arjun was with me.

After such a stroll, I would come back to my flat and sit immediately in front of my laptop and Skype Arjun. I wanted to tell him what I had seen and how much I missed him. But, by now, he was depressed at his failure to get a visa and he listened to me glumly, barely responding. Soon, he started to absent himself at the times we had planned to chat on Skype.

When we did connect, he was apologetic saying, "Sorry, darling, had to run some errands for my mom." Or he would text me via Skype, well after our appointed meeting time to say, "A late night at office, will talk tomorrow, OK?" If I sent a message to set a time he would reply, "Ah, you want to talk... mmmmm OK," but then he would often miss the appointment.

I began to get desperate, finding it harder and harder to concentrate on my studies. I had all these new thoughts and ideas about life based on what I saw in America. Parents didn't seem to nit-pick at the marriages of newlywed couples over here. Both partners in a relationship would take turns to pick up the groceries, clean the toilets, and cook. Looking at couples here, I could see how much ease and faith they had found in each other.

I wanted to share these new ideas with him, my life-partner. But he was busy, distant, and uninterested in my thoughts when we did chat. I tried to comfort myself that this was just a manifestation of his disappointment, that perhaps he was just a bit jealous of my American life. I thought I ought to encourage him to live a full life there, but my unease only grew. I turned to the one other person who I could turn to: Amma. Before Arjun had come into the picture and turned me into a grovelling puppy, I was a strong mama's girl. She and I would always sit together and discuss what we wanted out of life. We were both fond of kids and she always talked of how she'd love grandchildren and how she wished she'd had more kids of her own. Then she would say, "Oh well, no one gets everything they want out of life," and smile. When she left the room after a statement like that, humming to herself, my eyes would follow her in wonder, smiling at my luck in having such a wonderful mother.

Now when I called my mother from America to chat about my new life, she was enthusiastic for me, encouraging me in my dreams and plans, like she always had. She never asked about Arjun and I never said much about him. She knew why I was calling her, that something was wrong in my marriage. But Amma did not ask questions because she didn't want to add to my misery. She knew that to ask and have me confess the truth was to confirm that she had been right all along.

These conversations with my mother gave me the confidence to do what I knew I must.

I logged into his Skype account, whose password I had figured out, along with the one for his email account. The numerous emails and photos that I found in his email and his Skype log were proof that he had broken his vow to be faithful to me. He'd had other women in multiple ways and at multiple times during the nine months we had been apart. What surprised me most was that this entire harem with which he was engaged in online debauchery and

fornication were Tamil women. They had chatted and corresponded mostly in Tamil so that deciphering what types of relationships he was pursuing with them was very difficult for me. Amongst them was one particular Tamil woman who stood out, a name I found familiar. I soon remembered that she was a long time ex-girlfriend of his. More than online fornication, there were indications of emotional intimacy and companionship embedded in the few lines I was able to translate using Google.

I yelled and screamed at him. “You spineless fake of a man,” I cried. “You’re like an animal, look at all these bestial things you are doing on the internet. You have no trace of human civility in you. Aren’t you ashamed? What happens to my dignity as a wife when you do this kind of thing?”

He yelled back, “What do I care what people think? Woman, I need my peace of mind and you do nothing to give that to me. You only bring me such a world of suffering, you ungrateful woman,” and just like that he threw at me the D word before ending the call. I was stunned, silent. It was the biggest shock I had ever received in my life. I still remember how numb I felt as he said it out loud – divorce.

I was so frightened and, at the same time, desperate. What was going to happen to me? How could I ever face everyone? The shame! At the height of our love, I had walked around like a peacock flaunting my feathers and ignored my friends and family because I had Arjun. How could I ever walk in the streets and admit I was wrong? And what about my love for him? How could I live without him?

After that, we never talked about his infidelity. We tried to keep up a pleasant façade. I tried to act like the subdued, subservient wife. But my paranoia that he was in love with someone else while I loved him wholeheartedly would make me finally explode and, when he refused to tell me why he had missed a chat, I would scream, “Where were you? Who were you with?”

“Do you think we are at an army camp? Like you used to be when you were growing up, that you can control me like you used to be controlled?”

“What are you saying?”

“You need to let it go...this whole army camp business and the fact that your father was a Sinhalese soldier killed by the Tamil Tigers... I think you’re bringing all those ghosts into our marriage. Sometimes I feel like you’re looking at me like I’m one of those who killed your father.”

I was shocked. I blamed him for killing me, and not for the death of my father. Yet the animosity, the hate was brewing. And now that he had brought up our different races, that too began to enter into the fray. I began to think of him as a Tamil now, with all the stereotypes my people and family had of Tamils – devious, arrogant, traitorous, destroyers of innocent lives.

I felt so lost. Trapped in a foreign land, gradually losing a husband and helplessly watching his slip away. I yearned for my mother and her cooking. I yearned to be in her home on a Sunday morning, as if I were a child again, eating her amazing kiribath with ambulthiyal and lunumiris; yearned to feel loved, protected, and wanted again.

My pride prevented me from contacting her during that awful week. But then on my birthday she called.

“Many happy returns of the day, duwa,” she cried. “Is it summer there? Are the flowers beautiful?”

I felt like crying at what I had done to her. After all the shame I had put her through, she was still the same bright cheery woman she had always been.

Later that day, Loku Mama called to wish me and also to inform me that Amma was unwell. She had been suffering from a severe lower back pain and hadn’t even bothered to tell me. She had also not asked Arjun for his help, which confirmed my suspicion that she knew something wasn’t right. I felt proud of my mother. How valiant she was. She had never complained and never questioned me. I was filled with regret that I had turned my back on her when she had tried to show me the correct path in romance.

At that moment I longed for Amma and Sri Lanka as I had never done before. But I also dreaded going back and having to face my failed marriage. A new politeness had come between Arjun and me. He had suddenly got better at keeping our Skype dates but there were fewer of these now. They were also briefer. I knew that the end was near.



I went home during the Christmas holidays, mostly because not knowing what was happening at home was gnawing at me and I wanted to experience it for myself.

Arjun came to pick me up from the airport. It was a far different meeting to the way he had dropped me off months before. We had both been full of warmth and desperate longing then. Or I wondered, was it only I who had felt that way? We brushed cheeks and then did not look at each other as we drove home. We made desultory conversation, lapsing into periods of silence. I stared at the passing landscape while he stared ahead at the road.

At home, we lived like strangers. We rarely talked and our conversations ended up with him calling me unstable and me screaming at him for his infidelities. The more I heard him call me unstable, the more I began to believe him: such was his toxic effect on me. I started missing the calmness of the temple, the smell of incense, the dipping of my fingers in the oil lamps, the bright orange and yellow fire of them, and the touch of the smooth sand on the soles of my feet. But I couldn't go there. I had converted. I felt like a traitor and a fool. I had abandoned wisdom and a great philosophy for a religion that could not fulfil me as I had not entered it with faith.

My distrust of and disgust for Arjun by now included his Tamilness. He had become an embodiment of all the vile qualities my race associated with his race. But now, added to this, an antipathy was growing towards his religion. I couldn't pass a Catholic church or a statue on a street corner without curling my lips in disgust and contempt. I was certainly never going to enter a church again. And all the time, my desire for the calmness of the temple grew and finally I said to Amma one day, "Will you go to the temple with me, Amma?"

"Of course, puthe, let's go," she said promptly. Through her smile, I could see a great sorrow. I saw that she had found out about the state of my marriage.

The fact that she knew but did not judge me lifted a weight from my shoulders. On that visit to the temple I finally felt at peace. My turbulent

thoughts quietened as I lit lamps, chanted those well-known verses, and made offerings of flowers before the Lord Buddha once again.

When I got home, Arjun happened to be there. He saw my all-white attire, the empty flower basket, and the bottle of oil, and he guessed where I had been.

“See,” he said bitterly, “This was what I knew you’d do. You can’t make up your mind and stick to one thing. I told my family you were completely loyal to us and now I see you are going back to the temple. Why can’t you pick a side or make a decision and stick to it?”

I stared at him aghast, as if he had lost his mind. Loyalty? To him? I opened my mouth to confront him, but shut it again not knowing what I could possibly say.

“You, woman, are uncontrollable. You are going to ruin me one day if I stay with you. What about *my* dignity?”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I continued to keep my mouth shut. Because now I knew, I had finally accepted that there was no point trying to rationalise with a man like this.

The next day when I got home from shopping, all his things were gone. He never came back to this home, never made a gesture towards explaining himself to me. It’s strange that religion became the final thing that broke us up for good. Race and religion, in our relationship - like in our country - had become symbols, shorthand for other deeper frustrations and conflicts.

I waited for a month before I called him.

“How unfairly you have treated me, Arjun. After everything I gave up and did for you.” I knew my voice was breaking.

He kept quiet for a while and finally said, “Do you have any idea how difficult it is for me to be with you? I have to go.” He hung up.

A year later, when I opened the post-box, I found an envelope containing summons. He had filed for divorce. I went to court meekly and signed whatever documents needed to be signed. I didn’t bother about a lawyer and worked with the court-appointed lawyer to settle things as smoothly as possible. In three

months it was all done. It was like we had never existed.

A year passed and then I ran into one of his good friends while shopping. I had begun to feel more like myself again and I felt thankful for this. Lohan informed me that Arjun was married again. To his Tamil ex-girlfriend. Apparently they had always stayed friends through thick and thin, not to mention during “the most troublesome times in his life,” his friend told me.

This bothered me for about a week, kept me up at night, but then things became routine and normal again.



If truth be told, at times like this, when the dusk sets in, the moon begins to rise over the horizon, and the last straggling birds fly back their nests, I become nostalgic. He was the only man I had truly loved: passionately, deeply, unselfishly. When I was with him, my anxiety of never feeling at home with someone was stilled. And yes, the anxiety that I might never ever feel that feeling again does still succeed in unsettling me now and again.

But with time, the intensity of the longing and feelings of loss have lessened and I have reached a state of numbness where I can afford to look at that traumatic sequence of events in my life with detachment.

A few months ago, during a nightfall like this, I would have had no choice but to force myself to get up and get on with my evening, to cringe at the idea of facing the lonely night ahead by myself. But now, I know from experience that like the purple hues – my favourite colour – in the dusky sky above me, people are unpredictable and unreliable, irrespective of race, religion or culture. It is part of being human – this insufferable yet innate ability to not live up to anybody’s expectations, including your own.

***Chamindri Liyange*** is a resident of Negombo, born to humble and down-to-earth middle class parents. She is a teacher of Speech & Drama and English & English Literature. Writing and literature have always been her two constant passions. Negombo's rich cultural diversity has always inspired her writing.

## *Poems*

Sanduni Dilrukshi

### *Horowpathana*<sup>1</sup>

*Hiding in the forest, then  
Organising committees to  
Reconstruct their houses, these  
Orphans, mothers, and wives  
Weep even today for their lost men.  
Persisting despite their sorrowful hearts,  
Attempting to put back their lives,  
Teaching themselves to live cheaply,  
Haunted by memories of war  
As they plow and sow their fields,  
Never forgetting the dead and disappeared,  
Admirably, the women of Horowpathana struggle on.*

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1 A border village caught on the frontlines of the war between the LTTE and the army. The villagers are Sinhalese and many of them lost family members (particularly male members) to the LTTE.

***One Heart***

The war was beginning,  
horror was spreading,  
yet you left to fight for your land.  
Why did you abandon me like this?

The war is now over,  
day upon day passing,  
  
year by year elapsing,  
still I am weeping.  
Why did you abandon me like this?

***A Soldier's Lament***

My heart is red,  
our love is red,  
our home is red,  
dead bodies are red,  
Red, Red, Red,  
is all I see,  
asleep or awake.

**Wondrous**

Trees are murmuring,  
birds flying in the sky, then  
just like that, a bomb blast.

*Sanduni Dilrukshi is a student at Sanghamitta College, Galle. She is 18 years old and prefers to talk about friendship, love, peace and humanity rather than war. She strongly believes in Lord Buddha and the Gods and she would like to contribute towards building a peaceful, happy nation.*

## *Poems*

Arani Vamathevan

### *Record Keeper*

I have come to the borders of sleep  
trapped between rows of barbed wire,  
a dirty immigrant in a refugee camp  
crying for my lost joys.

We were woken by black smoke  
spewing death down on us.  
Our lives crumbled as  
the nightmare came lowering,  
teaching me never to smile again.

The mad dog of war  
has tasted human blood,  
but not mine.

Why have I been spared?  
One day the answer arrives:

“You are the record keeper.  
Guard the memories and pass them on.”

***War Flowers***

Seeded in battle  
Nourished by buried corpses  
Growing high on grief.

***My life in the Vanni***

I was quite young and  
the aim of my waking hours  
was to dream about him.  
“Jey is a nice boy”, a “brave boy,”  
“Ever so generous”,  
“patient, humble, a teetotaler,”  
everyone said.  
My heart recognised him for  
the good man he was.

Our first unexpected meeting  
in Kovil was incredible.

My heart leapt up  
at his smile, his kind words,  
the way his eyes lingered on mine.  
I had to count time to force myself  
not to text him too often,  
but I didn't always succeed.  
One dark day,  
the Boys surrounded our village.  
Pointed at him and said, "You, a border guard!"  
They ordered him to, "Fight for our land."

A year later,  
They declared him a "maaveera".  
Gave him a burial with all honours.

Something broke in me after that  
and has remained beyond repair,  
a souvenir of my life in the Vanni.

*Arani Vamathevan* was born in Jaffna. She was displaced in 1995 and settled in Vavuniya. She is currently following a degree in management and a Higher National Diploma in English in Vavuniya. She was displaced at the age of 1, and cannot remember much about the war, but her passion for writing poems came when she heard her parents' stories of struggle during wartime. Through her writing, she hopes to facilitate better understanding among people about the futility of war and the importance of peace.

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1 A title given by the LTTE for a cadre who lost his life in the struggle.

## *What's in a Name?*

Chathuni Jalathge

It was June 2009. Last month the government won the war, the LTTE leader - Prabhakaran - was killed, and the miserable years were over for Sri Lanka.

Nilu was a doctor working at the General Hospital in Sabaragamuwa. She worked in ward number 48, the crazy ward. The doors of the ward were always locked and so were the drug cupboards. It was the neatest ward in the hospital.

In appearance, some of the patients were very clean, but others looked dirty and had unusual behaviours. Sometimes they laughed too much. Often, the more desperate patients were sedated.

One day, a mentally ill person was admitted to Nilu's ward. The patient was a mother who was severely affected by the war. She was brought to hospital by a relative. While they were admitting and examining her, the patient stood still like a statue. The relative told Nilu that the patient was her sister. She didn't pay attention to anything around her. She did not eat or sleep. Nilu asked the woman, "What is your name?" but she didn't answer, didn't even respond with any facial expressions. The woman's sister, because she was fluent in Sinhala, was able to answer questions about her and tell them the woman's name was "Devi." When Nilu asked about the cause of her sickness, the relative was silent. It was apparent that she didn't want to reveal this. Nilu suspected that the patient's sickness was not a curable one, but she hoped that it could be controlled temporarily through treatment.

One day, the relative visited Nilu in the hospital and told her that she couldn't care for Devi's child anymore because she was from a poor family. "If anyone would like to adopt the child, I would like to give the child to them. Her mother will always be too sick, I think, to raise a child." She also revealed that the child, who was 4-years old, didn't seem traumatised by what she had survived during the war, or by her mother's illness. The relative added, "She doesn't have much understanding about what happened, even though her father died in the war. I cannot imagine what this child's future will be. Her father's only dream was to see

her educated and living well.” The relative broke down at this point, sobbing.

Nilu was shocked. She tried to go about her tasks and forget the woman’s words but the story stayed with her and tugged at her heart all day. She couldn’t seem to forget the unknown little girl who had lost so much.

Nilu’s husband, Sunil, was an engineer. Unfortunately, they could not have children and this made Nilu sad because she loved little children very much. At home, Nilu told her husband what she had seen and heard. After a great deal of discussion, they decided to adopt the child.

The day the girl arrived, was a bright Sunday morning with a fresh breeze blowing from the sea. In preparation for their new daughter, Nilu prepared spicy chicken pizza.

When the doorbell rang, Nilu and Sunil rushed to the door. The relative was carrying a pretty little girl whose eyes lit up when she saw the inside of their house. Within a few minutes of entering the house, the girl seemed completely at ease with Nilu and Sunil. She was small and her huge dark eyes filled her little 4-year-old face. According to her relative, her name was “Parvathy”. Nilu and Sunil had bought her some toys and she happily played with them, sitting on their laps. She spoke in Tamil to them and fortunately Sunil knew a little Tamil from working in the East and he could communicate with the girl. After a few hours, the relative said, “I need to go back to our village this morning because of an urgent matter.”

“It’s ok,” Nilu responded, “we promise you, we will love and care for your child as our own daughter.”

The relative teared up. “That is my only wish.”



The little girl, apart from some crying on the first day when she was left by her aunt, settled easily into her new home. As the days passed, Nilu and Sunil became closer and closer to the little child. Nilu loved coming home in the evenings because then she could play with the girl, unable to resist hugging

and kissing her as they played. The girl was soon babbling fluently to them in Sinhala.

A couple of months after the girl came to be with them, her mother, released some time ago from the hospital, committed suicide. They were sad to hear this news from the girl's aunt but, at the same time, were now free to officially adopt the girl. Nilu informed her relatives about the adoption and they were delighted about it, because they too had come to love the little girl.

Nilu and Sunil had only one reservation about their new daughter – her name. Their nickname for her was “Podi”, but they could not decide whether to keep her Tamil name or give her a Sinhala one. They had different opinions on this and one night Nilu and Sunil argued about it.

“I want to change her name to a Sinhala one,” Nilu insisted.

“But, we can't do that,” Sunil said. “She's not Sinhalese, she's Tamil. You can't erase her heritage!”

“What are you saying?” Nilu demanded aggressively, even though she understood well what he meant.

“I'm saying that we have to let her keep her name. It's all she has left of her past life and her real parents.”

“But I want her to be our daughter. I want her to fit into life here with us.” Nilu started crying.

“It's okay, Nilu.” Her husband drew her against his chest. “Be calm, don't get angry. I have a solution.”

Nilu looked at him through her tears, waiting for him to continue.

“Why don't you talk with your friend, Rajeshwari, about this matter? She is Tamil; she will know the right thing to do.”

Nilu felt reassured by this idea.

Soon after this, Nilu went to Rajeshwari's house and discussed the matter with her. After a moment of contemplation, Rajeshwari said, “In my opinion, I think it is much better not to change her name. I think you should keep her real name

‘Parvathy’. Because if you change her name, it’s an erasure of her racial identity. And later, she will be confused about who she is.”

But Nilu wasn’t satisfied and decided she would speak to a Tamil doctor colleague of hers, Siva. He disagreed with Rajeshwari. “In my opinion, it is better to change her name to a Sinhala one because it is vital for her future. If her name is Tamil, though you are Sinhalese, it will be a problem when she is admitted to school. And also, later in her life, when it comes to getting a job or marrying a Sinhalese boy, she might encounter difficulties. The war might be over, Nilu, but the prejudice goes on.”

At home, Nilu and Sunil kept talking about what to do but they couldn’t decide on a solution.

As she grew day by day, the little girl blossomed because of Nilu and Sunil’s love towards her. Her face would light up every time she saw them and she would insist that they both sit by her bedside until she fell asleep. Often, in the middle of the night, she would creep into their bed and snuggle between them. During the holidays, the three of them went to Ratnapura. The little girl was delighted by everything she saw and they were thrilled to see her delight.

About three months later, Parvathy’s aunt telephoned Nilu and said that she would visit the next morning because she needed to tell her something. She asked that Parvathy not be present. They didn’t want the aunt’s coming to upset the little girl, who appeared to have forgotten her past. Sunil took Parvathy to a nearby playground.

When Parvathy’s aunt arrived, Nilu greeted her warmly and the two women were soon having tea. After chatting for some time, the aunt fell silent. “I want to share my memories of the war period with you,” she said.

“I would like to hear them,” Nilu replied.

For a while Parvathy’s aunt did not speak, her face growing sadder and sadder. We had to face innumerable threats. We were ordinary Tamil villagers, not LTTE cadres.”

“In my opinion,” Nilu said, “the LTTE wanting to separate from Sri Lanka was the main reason for the war.”

The aunt said nothing to this but continued with her story, “We were in camps three times. At the last camp, we finally decided we’d had enough and returned to our village. Because of the aerial bombing at night, at about 6 o’ clock in the evening, we would go into the forest and at 9 o’ clock the next morning, we would return to our houses. Groups of men took it in turns to guard the village from robbers while everyone else was in the jungle. Parvathy’s father was a guard in our village.” Parvathy’s aunt paused and her face looked stricken. After a minute she continued, “One night Parvathy’s father was killed in a bomb blast.”

“Why didn’t you reveal the truth before?” Nilu asked horrified.

“Actually, I was afraid to tell the truth because we are Tamils,” the aunt said.

“We never consider the race or religion of people,” Nilu said. Then she blushed at her own lie. Faced with what these people had suffered, she felt ashamed.

The aunt thanked her again for adopting the girl and soon left.

After the aunt had gone, Nilu went into their shrine room and stood before the statue of Lord Buddha. She thought about how war is cruel and creates many problems for human beings, how it leaves unpleasant memories for all and destroys everything valuable in life. She prayed, “May war vanish from this world. May the world be a pleasant place for all to live together in peace and harmony, without any discrimination.”

But now Nilu knew that, if this peaceful world was to ever come into being, people like her must take the lead.

After that, Parvathy – for such remained her name – spent all her days loved by her adopted mother and father, and loving them back.

***Chathuni Jalathge** is a student at Sanghamitta Girl’s College (Sanghamitta Balika Vidyalyaya), Galle and is 18 years old. She spends her free time reading and hopes one day to publish a collection of her short stories. She believes that the strength of people matters in building bridges and fostering reconciliation between the divided communities of Sri Lanka, and that this bridge-building should take place with genuine regard and mutual respect for each other.*

## *The Intruder: A Futuristic Tale*

Anjalee Nadarajan.

An environmental holocaust had almost completely devastated Sri Lanka. The fishermen caste was no more; they had been the first to perish. There were bands of survivors, groups of ten to twenty people scattered all over the island. They were the left-behind people who had no relatives in the diaspora willing to shelter them. There were also people like Paul Fernandes who had been an electronics expert with hopes of helping his country. He had stayed behind rather than go abroad to live or work. Paul had counted on alternative energy systems taking over, if traditional power failed. In the two years since the disaster, they too had failed.

Paul belonged to a band of twelve men. There had been two women before, but one morning they were gone, although no one knew where. Paul felt sorry about that. He and the older woman had just begun a friendship. Anil was the group's leader. A politician's assistant before the disaster, he retained the confidence and authority of his former office. He also had a rifle and what seemed to be a large supply of bullets that he kept hidden somewhere in the surrounding jungle.

The men were relieved to listen to him and follow his orders. Every day they had the same routine: clear out the fire, forage for fruit and other edible greenery, set up camp at a new spot every night, though why they did the latter was a mystery to everyone except Anil, who had given this cryptic order. Two of the men, who had been hunters before, were delegated the task of catching animals for meat. One day they had crept upon a sleeping baby elephant. Anil passed his rifle over to one of the hunters who carefully took aim and shot the animal dead. They had not had to worry about sustenance for some time. Anil always divided the forage equally among the band, so that there was no outward cause for quarrel.

One day, Paul set out for a nearby coconut grove. Some of the men had complained about the lack of coconut curries. Anil rolled his eyes when he

heard this trivial grievance. He pulled Paul aside, and told him to go see if he could find coconuts. Paul knew just the place. He had stumbled upon it two weeks before.

When he got to the clearing, he stood staring up at the coconuts. The trees were sturdy enough to support his weight but before he scaled the one with the most coconuts, he made sure by climbing a few feet up and giving the tree a good shake. Then, confident, he hummed as he clambered up. When he reached the top, he seized several coconuts and threw them down to the ground.

“Hey!”

The cry startled him, and he parted some fronds and peered down. A young boy stood in the clearing, some distance from the tree, staring up at him, hands on hips.

“Who are you?” Paul shouted. His heart began to beat faster.

“I’m... I’m not from here.”

“Well, where did you come from?” He cried, beginning to climb back down.

When he reached the ground, he stood surveying the boy who was about fourteen. Paul was a whole foot taller than the boy and stronger too. If things came to a head, he knew he would be the undisputed winner.

The boy lowered his gaze. “I ran away, my band was camping somewhere in the North. I didn’t want to be there anymore, so I left.”

Paul scrutinised the boy. He was dressed in just a pair of shorts and some sandals. “What is your name?”

“Nishanth. What’s yours?”

Paul told him and then, feeling sorry for the boy, he extended his hand in friendship and they shook. He said “Come with me. I’ve got enough coconuts.” He ordered the boy to carry as many coconuts as he could handle and Paul took the rest himself. They walked back in silence to the camp.

Anil was seated on a rock polishing his rifle, when they came through the thicket into the clearing. “Oh,” he said and raised an eyebrow. “And hello, who is this?”

Paul cleared his throat, “This is Nishanth. He ran away from his band in the North. I think he’s been trailing us for a few days.”

“Is that true?” Anil asked, still staying seated. He lifted his gun and squinted through it, checking the sights.

Nishanth nodded. There was uncertainty in his eyes, and fear. Anil placed the rifle on the ground, “Nishanth... Isn’t that a Tamil name?”

“Yes, my parents were Tamil.”

Paul watched Anil. He had never seen the leader so affable. A playfulness lurked in his smile, his eyes. Maybe it was the joy in encountering another living human being outside their small band.

“My mother was Tamil too,” Anil said. “Please sit down. You must be hungry. Have something to eat.”

Paul was surprised to learn this about Anil, but then no one asked who was what race anymore. It had become irrelevant in the face of this holocaust. Yet until then, even though the civil war was over twenty years ago, race had still mattered a lot.

Anil made everyone else stand around in a circle with Nishanth in the middle. The boy was sitting cross-legged, as though he expected food piled on a banana leaf.

“Look at you sitting there! You actually expect us to feed you, don’t you?” Anil scoffed, looking around at his men.

Nishanth frowned. “But you invited me to eat.”

“Use your eyes, boy. Do any of us look well fed to you? Do we look like we have anything to spare?”

The boy muttered a quiet, “No.”

“Get up, help Paul with his work.” Anil clapped Paul’s back. “Paul, you brought him here, you’re saddled with him. Everyone else, go back to your work.”

The others went off to do various unimportant tasks, many of which they were simply doing again. The appearance of doing something appeased Anil, who would then leave them alone.

Paul and Nishanth walked back to the clearing with the coconut trees, to get a few more. “Why is he the boss?” the boy asked.

Paul searched for a reason, other than the fact that Anil was the one who owned the rifle. “I don’t know, we all just wanted someone to guide us. Anil had the necessary confidence and self-assurance.”

“In my band, our parents became the leaders. It made sense to my parents’ generation, that they be the leaders. But, for my generation, it didn’t make sense that the leaders could order everyone else around all the time, while not helping out themselves.” Nishanth shrugged. “That’s why I ran away. But I guess it’s the same everywhere. There is always a leader who does nothing but order other people around.”

Paul did not know what to say and for a while they gathered coconuts in silence. Then the boy said, “Maybe we should steal that rifle and hide it.”

Paul laughed. “A silly idea. Anil takes it everywhere with him.”

Over the next few weeks, though, Nishanth’s suggestion kept reverberating in Paul’s head. What if? What if they dared separate the leader from his tool of power? Could Anil’s increasing tyranny be stopped? For, in the past weeks, Anil had grown more demanding, asking the men to do tasks over and over again, such as sweep the clearing, re-boil water, etc. There was no reason for doing all this, just a chance for Anil to exercise his power.

One day, Anil dropped by as Paul and Nishanth were trying to trap small animals in the undergrowth.

“Don’t you miss your group, Nishanth?” Anil asked. He stood over them as they laboured to make the trap.

Paul and Nishanth glanced at each other.

“Yes, I do,” Nishanth grudgingly replied.

“Then why ever did you leave? Why don’t you just go back there?”

Paul staggered to his feet, “Wait a moment. Nishanth doesn’t have to go back if he doesn’t want to.”

Anil put his face close to Paul's. "But I want him to go back. Isn't that enough?" He turned to Nishanth. "Tomorrow you will leave."

Paul stepped back and did not say anything more. Anil urged them to catch some animals before the day was gone. Then he turned and left, without even a backwards glance, so sure was he of his power.

Paul and the boy stared at each other, helpless, angry. Finally Paul said, "I'm coming with you, Nishanth. Late tonight, after everyone else has gone to sleep, let us set out. We will walk south until we find another group who will take us."

Nishanth nodded in gratitude, his eyes tearing up.

They trapped a few squirrels, killed them, cooked and ate the animals right there. The men and Anil could starve for all they cared. Then they returned to the camp.

Anil was furious with them for not catching anything and the other men too were resentful, though quiet, not meeting Anil's gaze. As he went about doing whatever tasks Anil assigned him, Paul was aware of the leader's eyes following him. Paul was an excellent trapper and this failure of his must be suspicious. Later, that evening, when they gathered around the fire, Anil made an announcement, "From now on, I want Paul to help me with my tasks, and Ravi can do Paul's work instead," he said, pointing to a scrawny Tamil man who gazed confusedly at Paul. He said "And tonight, I want Paul to keep watch with me."

Paul himself was stunned. Had Anil somehow heard of their hurried plans? Or sensed it? Involuntarily, his eyes went to Nishanth who was squatting on the floor, and seeing the boy's helpless fear, he blurted out, "No. No, I don't want to do that task."

Anil quickly strode up to the boy, held the gun to his head and discharged it. As the boy toppled over, the men yelled and some rocked themselves, keening. Paul's screams were the loudest.

"Paul," Anil ordered, "please drag him beyond our camp and bury him somewhere. We don't want any more intruders."

For a moment, the two men stared at each other, and then Paul nodded numbly. He took up the boy's legs to drag him along but then changed his mind and lifted up the boy and carried him into the jungle.

Later, once he had buried the boy, he squatted by the grave lost in thought. How serious those old ties of race had been for so long. Now there were new allegiances. Yet, everything stayed the same – the same hatred of intruders, the same fierce competition for power, the same struggle over meagre resources.

*Anjalee Nadarajan* was born in Colombo but immigrated to Canada. Growing up in Mississauga, she has been fortunate enough to be exposed to both Tamil and Western influences.



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*Write to Reconcile III* is an insightful and unique collection of short stories, poems, and memoirs about the war and post-war period in Sri Lanka, written by emerging Sri Lankan authors, both at home and in the diaspora. The work collected in this book brings alive a fascinating multiplicity of experiences that will engross Sri Lankan and non-Sri Lankan readers, taking them into worlds they would not otherwise have the opportunity to penetrate: A young

Tamil boy stuck in a refugee detention camp in Australia grapples with his homelessness both in this foreign country, and also back in his homeland; a young Muslim woman finds her faith in a better Sri Lanka challenged by the anti-Muslim violence in Aluthgama that has direct consequences for her family;

a court stenographer's traumatic past is awoken by a rape trial she must document, involving Sinhalese soldiers and two Tamil women; a Sinhalese couple, who have adopted a Tamil baby, debate whether to keep the child's Tamil name or change it to a Sinhalese one; an alternative fictional version of history looks at the situation of a boy and his family in the independent state of Eelam; a young Sinhalese man from London grows aware of his family's complicity in a terrible act of violence; a Sinhalese woman recalls a real life trip she made with her doctor father to the LTTE-dominated East, where she made friends with a female LTTE soldier; and a Tamil woman from London returns to her war devastated village of Puthukkudiyiruppu. The poems showcased in the anthology capture a multiplicity of experiences; among them, such as the effect of the war on Sinhalese farmers in border villages, the slaughter of

Muslims by the LTTE in the Kattankuddy mosque, and the effect of war on women's lives and bodies.

*Write to Reconcile III* is essential reading for anyone interested in Sri Lanka's past, present and future. It is a celebration of the country's diversity, while also laying bare important truths about its history.



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