**Ayzosh**

Lalini Shanela Ranaraja

You say they fasted for three days, and I don’t ask you what fasting means to people already starving.

\*

The first time I learned Tamil was from a moon-skinned girl whose name meant *gift from God.*

She had a Lion King backpack and sat next to me in Sunday school, and we said *vanakkam* to each other and didn’t talk about the war.

Our classroom was blasted with birdshit and ripped apart

by macaques; we retreated to a window the color of jungle fatigues

to watch the police horses at the roundabout, while she taught me how to name them *kuthiraikal*, replacing the one Tamil name every Sinhala girl knew

*(Velupillai Prabhakaran).*

The war ended when we were eleven

and I have not seen her in a decade.

\*

In April I watched sorority sisters marching past in matching shorts as you shook apart describing viral videos of Ethiopian soldiers shooting

Tigrayan farmers at point blank range.

In July I scrolled past Instagram posts of Tigrayan civilians jeering

at Ethiopian prisoners of war being paraded through Mekelle.

I am sure of nothing except that since last November I have been counting

headlines and bylines and the anchors cornering your mouth as it folds

under its own weight, like a clothesline too heavy with dirty laundry.

I learn the Amharic alphabet and revel in your smile

the first time I ask you *ïndämñin näh?* in your accent.

I stay up all night memorizing letters of the *fidäl* and imagining how they would look behind bars of ink.

\*

My father says if it weren’t for the army, we would all be speaking Tamil.

\*

To me you have become the face of their suffering, like Phan Thi Kim Phuc, like Sharbat Gula,

like Kong Nyong.

I remember that Kevin Carter died by carbon monoxide four months after being awarded the Pulitzer,

and in my journalism seminar he is an object lesson in ethics.

\*

The last time I learned Tamil didn’t take.

The tutor’s name meant *God’s grace* and she offered to teach me via telephone in America

and then I blocked her on Facebook.

The Tamil script is an abugida, like Amharic, like Sinhala;

it slips through my fingers faster than grains of Jaffna sand.

There are no words in any of my tongues for everything I want to say.

*I am sorry for what our people did to each other.*

*I am sorry I didn’t want to sound like you.*

*I am sorry that our suffering ceases to matter anywhere beyond this island because the rest of the world cannot translate the differences between us.*

I could say in Sinhala *mata samavenna–* but that means forgive me

and that’s not what I mean.

\*

The night the ambulance arrived to pronounce you

perfectly fine even though you couldn’t breathe I begged you

to stay strong because we couldn’t lose you. I wanted to scratch

inside your skin so I could siphon away your pain I wanted to scream

how dare you still have faith I wanted to kneel

beside you in the dark and pray to the Virgin Mary but I knew

I would only taint you with my blasphemy.

\*

When the bombs exploded across the island, I couldn’t stop scouring the Internet because they had cut off WhatsApp and my mother had to email me

to say they were alive

and my Nepali roommate asked if I could please stop crying

and the American counselor diagnosed me with survivor’s guilt

and the Lutheran pastor agreed to host a candlelit vigil

and I stood at the altar rail and sang a Sinhalese Catholic hymn no one else could understand.

\*

I don’t remind you now of the day you praised the beauty of a sacrificial death, because that was last March, and there were more losses in my column than yours then,

and we thought a pandemic would equalize us.

All our parents had the same childhood, on either side of the Bay of Bengal.

If the violence hadn’t followed us for generations across the oceans,

would we care less or more about tallying death tolls?

\*

Nothing I can say is verifiable, so I veil it all and offer only fragments

from which subjective truths can be deduced, hide behind interpretations

for which I can claim deniability, wield calculated permutations

of my personal and impersonal histories.

A bullet-riddled crucifix. A ripped abaya.

A tricycle with the pedals shot off.

\*

One night I call you after smashing unwashed wine glasses in the sink

without turning on the lights

and ask you to explain *ayzosh* to me

as I pick out the perfect shard and you sigh

*it means stay strong;*

*you say it when someone is about to give up.*