

Cartography

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“Where is the intimate and truthful in all this?... After the cups of tea, coffee, public conversations...I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover.”

- Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*

KANDY (*“his horoscope predicted he would almost die before he was 25 and would marry a foreigner, which was all true”*)

My first afternoon nap in Sri Lanka was interrupted by a car crash. Above me, a mosquito net, delicate as a vestigial wing, shivered at the noise. Heavy with lost hours, sure I was dreaming, I went back to sleep. Later, I was told the crash happened right down the street; but there was no evidence of a violent arrival, or return. That night, I woke up in a hot terror, listening to the fast-beating dark. The scent of jasmine slipping through my window like a ghost.

PEREDENIYA (*“the students rioted out here for hours, but they couldn't get inside”*)

The Vice Chancellor's Lodge, an old colonial ruin, was beautiful but seemingly abandoned at certain gray hours of the day. I wandered alone around the grounds like a heroine in a Victorian novel, past lily pads that trembled in mucky stone fountains, under wooden verandas heavy with pink flowers. Everything was lovely but overgrown, smelling sweet to the point of rot, like the glowing inner centimeter of cantaloupes that made me, a sensitive sixth grader, want to vomit up my dinner. The house was intricately decaying. A flying cockroach crawled out of the bath, so large I thought it was a mouse. Servants brought us our breakfast silently. Embarrassed by my newfound privilege, I was afraid to look them in the eyes, recording nothing but my own dense, sickly shame.

MATARA

("they all went to the water to see what happened, which is how they all died")

We stayed at a beach house so close to the water that when I woke up in the chilly, sunless morning, my lips were frosted with salt. When I woke up for a second time (this happened often during my trip, so many starts and stops occurring in one day that I became unable to effectively distinguish between days and nights, Mondays and Tuesdays, temporal lines blurring together until they were violently wrenched apart in a screech of colliding metal), the ocean was a bright blue, nearly green, exactly the aquamarine of the birthstone necklace my best friend Lauren wore around her neck at home. Against the white sand, the color was brighter than against her white neck, or perhaps it was just because there was more of it. That morning I took my first sea bath, swimming awkwardly in all that lost jewelry.

TRINCOMALEE

("one day we'll go there when it's safe, I promise")

From city to country, and then back again. Tasted the jackfruit curry my aunt made because I couldn't say no: a dim yellow richness that furrowed roots into my soft palate like the 300-year-old fig tree I leaned against, gingerly, in the Peredeniya National Gardens, my sneakers resting against its octopus-like roots. Gold and green, everywhere. The sky swelled with water, always, light blues and grays staring like foreign irises. Broken palms framing the edge of long highways. The ocean humming a siren song beyond. There was the shell of a large boat tucked neatly into white sand, a carcass, and I was told that the government still hadn't cleaned up all the wreckage yet. The North had the whitest beaches on the island, I heard, but never confirmed.

NUWARA ELIYA

("the British were better than the Dutch, which is better than nothing")

Golden cups marking the hour, thickened by cream and sweetened with sticky chunks of jaggery, staining tablecloths like punched mouths. Hills swelling lushly, improbably. My breath opaque against the car window glass. Skin pricking up as we rose, slowly, like steam. My parents and I walked to a rest house at the edge of a precipice and looked out over the edge—an incredible view, so high above everything. A mountain, dragon-green, bellowing into white cloud. A middle-aged tourist in khakis on a rattan stool nearby, painting the scenery in watery pastels that bled, impotent, into white. A copy of a copy of a copy. The mountain, a violent aftershock beneath my closed lids.

PROVIDENCE

("the memory is the painting and the painting is the memory and the memory is—")

A found memory, tails-up—red and gold where there once was green and blue. The lost scenery beating beneath me like an organ. Art students sketching the scenery, and there! suddenly! the Englishman again, perched smartly on khaki and rattan, the scenery clouding like Olympus beneath his shaking hand. Sudden hallucination of capture, whiteness.

ANURADHAPURA

("they shot them while they were praying – all 146 of them, one by one")

Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Vedda. Innumerable holy places, impossible for me to set apart, essential for me to see. The desert's dense holy heart housed Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi—the sacred branch of the sacred Bo tree planted in 288 B.C., supported by shining gold arms, under which the Buddha was said to have found enlightenment, and under which I now stood, staring, my neck cricked so high I missed the soldiers lying in foxholes, waiting for a sign of suspicious movement, triggers at the ready. From across the way, I spied the Kataragama shrine, in honor of the Hindu guardian that gave, somehow, this Buddhist site its name—red and gold, glimmering, the national colors, shining, in service to gods and divided country.

YALA

("if they had followed the animals uphill they might have survived")

Touring through the national park, I tried, unsuccessfully, to spot Sri Lankan leopards, the only big cat native to the island. Very few animals died in the tsunami, we were told, and I nodded, pleased.

KEGALLE

("why did you go through them? you could have just gone around")

No creature more feared and treasured in this country than the elephant. Huge animals at the Perahera parade draped in colored lights and filigreed, blood-red velvet, swaying like moons against the orange night as they trundled in a row, carrying thin shirtless men and, just once, the Buddha's sacred tooth, hidden in a gold box within another gold box within another. On our way to our safely-reserved seats at a nearby bank, I was nearly swallowed up in the crowd. Brown bodies and round syllables separating me from my parents, pressing clamorous against me. Fear like I'd never known, in a country that hardly knew me. The elephants tramping, dangerous and holy, by.

COLOMBO

(“one day you should write about all of this”)

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (a book that I re-read, voraciously, during that trip), Wilde rhapsodized about famous jewels of the centuries, including, to my excitement, the sentence, “*The King of Ceylon rode through his city with a large ruby in his hand, at the ceremony of his coronation.*” Footnote, provided: *Ceylon, the former name of modern Sri Lanka, a small teardrop-shaped island near India.* I combed through wet leaves for this glimmer of sensual excess—found only dust, and family. In a dimly-lit, crowded party, my uncle’s professorial friend asked me, with the clipped syllables of empire, whether I had read Michael Ondaatje. *Perhaps, one day, you will meet him.* I was introduced to pale, gray-eyed Burgher women with names like Jacqueline and Charlotte, and a dark-skinned Tamil man whom my father greeted genially, which confused me, because I was young, and a bad listener, and ignorant of my own history. We couldn’t go into the city the third day because there was a bank bombing. I was vaguely disappointed. I saw the explosion on the news. The bank was near the mall we had recently been to—where I had purchased a pirated rock CD for twenty rupees. More tea, instead, in my aunt’s house in the country, away from the blood. Kisses like gauze on both sides of my cheeks.

WEERAKETTIYA

(“if I stayed here, I would have been dead by 25”)

A village, a home base, in remote Southern farmland. Populated by family members I’d never met, names I couldn’t pronounce. A creek my father remembered being a river. Stories, recalled. (An example: my father telling me about the pet potbelly pig they kept when he was a child, brought home by my uncle Ranjith, the self-styled black sheep of the family, who gifted the pig to my grandmother and then vanished, pigless, under mysterious circumstances, and because my grandfather, a devout Buddhist, could not slaughter or turn out the animal, it stayed, growing to several hundred pounds, and would follow around my grandmother like a dog, begging for scraps from the table, following my grandfather—a thin man with a long, silver ponytail and a walking stick—into the village, causing general havoc by breaking into people’s gardens and eating their vegetables, prompting the ultimately difficult decision that the pig—a now beloved member of the family—was to live out the rest of its life comfortably at a nearby farm; except that Ranjith, perhaps out of confusion or for profit, sold the pig for slaughter, never suspecting that the pig, crammed with other bodies in a small transport truck, as it veered further and further away from the village, would escape, but it did, actually *broke out* of the wooden bars and tried to run home, terrorizing cars on the road with its comedic largeness, getting gloriously far before it was killed, leading to its final

and maybe inevitable butchering, providing enough meat to feed the entire village, but – my father says this, with conviction—it was rumored that everyone who ate the meat got sick). Photographs of my father as a baby wearing a long dress, like a girl. A cousin with a thin, familiar face. Rooms unexplored. An old dog. A dead brother. Things said in words I couldn't understand. Things impossible to say. A thin brown creek seeping through my white sneakers. My uncle Ranjith, potbellied and balding, in a faded red sarong, in the center of a faded living room, at the center of this faded map.

MANHATTAN

("he sailed from the north, the son of a princess and a lion, and found it here")

When the tsunami hit, I was 10 years old and wide awake, twisting in my blue twin sheets. Hours lining up like teeth. The ocean swelling like a tongue. 11 years later, I am in New York, and it happens again—that convulsive return. A certain corner on 34th street that smells densely of sweat and flowers and suddenly, without warning, the tropics. Whole countries pushing up through concrete. What does it mean? The people pushing around me like elephants. History stuck in my throat. I have no answer, except that perhaps I am not so far away from these lands and skies and seas as I think.