

Vyshali Manivannan

White van fear

I

I have lost count of the days since the explosion in Chenkalady turned the street to dust and a soldier to fragments. What they later realized was a claymore mine injured four or six or twelve civilians, one or three children, a possible mother flayed by shrapnel and cracked flying rock. I have an uncle who may or may not live there but the phones have never been good and, anyway, I'm afraid of being traced. Finally I am learning: the numbers are not specific and the news cannot be trusted.

II

I have to believe that there is a way to speak of this violence without transforming it into a lie, an embellishment, another of the stories with which I grew up. Without draining it of its power. I would like to have in me the courage to say to you, This woman with her baby girl, she was cut down in the street by the Tamil Tigers, the SLA, Karuna's people, though anyone's God knows where Karuna himself has gone. Fled to Malaysia or living in Colombo or the jungles of the eastern province, or dead. Months ago I could picture it so clearly: hands bound behind his back, on his knees, gun firing point-blank into the back of his skull. They would burn his body in a lime-kiln as they did my uncle's father when they shot him, so no evidence would be found.

I am anxious when it comes to writing about this in a form that makes it true.

I don't know if the baby was a girl, or where she was cut down or whose hands held the rusted machetes. (Were they rusted? Did they gleam a warning in the sun as her attackers came to meet her?) Only that a woman was left in pieces on the sidewalk and it was said her child was taken. We string assumptions together like colored beads on fish-line, desperate in our poverty to make necklaces that make sense. I sift through endless news articles to find a kernel of truth and suspect that breaking that seed open would reveal a worm-eaten labyrinth.

III

In my life there always has been a mysterious They to whom I ascribed unnatural powers of observation. They see what you write. They know. They will find and kill you. They have no scruples; They are everywhere. In August a Tiger sympathizer was arrested in Connecticut, no more than a state or two away.

Sometimes I am very conscious of how my body holds itself together, the physical forces and gravitational pulls that keep us moving and whole. Printed on the inside of my eyelids are photographs of the dismembered, the charred beyond recognition, the youthful, the still recognizable. My father tells me our family in Batticaloa laughs about the time shelling shook their street and made them hurry to the basement. My young cousins' ages fall into the ranks of child-soldiers. I fight sleep at night to avoid waking to the feeling of metal ripping my stomach apart like cloth.

I do this to myself and smile when people ask why. It is easier to laugh about death. I put it down to my burgeoning masochism.

IV

I am calling my anxiety *white van fear* for the terror inspired by the unlicensed cars that sweep through cities and villages at night. Where they go, disappearances follow. Aid workers and journalists write up the sob stories but personally I think no family would have the courage to publicly grieve. Anyway aid workers die here and journalists have disappeared too.

A measure of truth would allow me, I think, to sleep with my eyes open.