

I'll always remember the particular intensity that malnutrition brings on, I know that I miss it still. That alertness of sensation, where every minute cell in the body is awake and alive to the smallest details of the outside world. I've been told this is instinctual, a biological reaction to the threat that the hungry body perceives itself to be under; that a malnourished animal is weaker, more vulnerable to predators, and compensates by trying to pick up on danger early enough to still be able to escape. The world glistens in this state of apprehension. Your skin prickles. When I was travelling in this state, so many days felt strangely brittle, saturated, super-real.

Even now, I find it hard to separate what I experienced in Sri Lanka from what I experienced in my body, to figure out how much of my perception was sharpened by my hunger, how much by the complicated novelty and

otherness that travel always involves. At that stage, it was three years since I had fallen ill, but only eighteen months since the very rare and still-untreatable cause of my persistent vomiting had been identified. But I'm not sure if the ground hadn't already shifted again then, if the physical disease hadn't taken on the disordered dimensions that I'm fighting to this day.

I've also discovered, since my diagnosis, that even specialist opinion has shifted as to the nature of that physical condition. Rumination is a muscular tic of the upper stomach and its sphincter. Like any muscular tic it is unconscious and uncontrollable, but at least in part psychosomatic. This doesn't make it any less bodily, any less real. When I was finally diagnosed, the first thing the specialist said was 'You're not making this up and you're not going mad'; and eight years later the condition was added to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the DSM, which is the standard classification manual for mental health used by psychiatrists worldwide.

I travelled to Sri Lanka three years before I stepped for the first time inside the office of a psychologist, five years before I fully realised that there was more to my illness, to my hunger, than simple physicality. But I sometimes think that it was here, in Colombo, that things changed, and my illness grew more complicated. Even so, I never can tell to what degree pathology stood between me and the country that I came to love, or if I ever could have done things differently.

On my first day in Colombo, I wrote in my journal that the light seemed golden, that I'd felt pure joy on seeing so many animals – monkeys and lizards, crows and cows – wandering the red-earthed streets. On my second day, unable to properly pronounce the name of the suburb in which I was living, I got completely lost, riding in the backseat of a three-wheeler taxi, until the driver tried to kiss me in an unmapped alley. I ended up walking in the late-season rain, along streets that had no footpaths, to the low-roofed house where I was billeted to a Sinhalese family, then standing, silent and shaking, at my bedroom window, which overlooked a primary school, the children in immaculate white uniforms running on the pressed dirt of its playground. I already felt too small for the situation I'd placed myself in, alone and as-yet untravelled, in a part of the world I knew almost nothing about.

On my third day in Colombo, I started work. I arrived early at the offices of the local English-language newspaper where I was interned, and my section editor immediately assigned me to a story on the street children of the city. I'm still not sure if she was deliberately trying to provoke me, fresh off the plane as I was, to throw my complacent, sunburnt skin into a world that I had little comprehension of. Anesha, a young and quiet colleague with a thick wave of hair reaching right to her waist, accompanied me to translate. We took a driver, and a van, my digital camera. I'd had half a piece of strangely sweet toast with imported Marmite for breakfast. My billet family had bought the Marmite for me from a small grocer near their house; it

was stocked alongside Diet Coke, pasta, and toilet paper on a shelf labelled 'Western Items' near the back of the store.

I never found out the names of the places we went to that day, I never went through them again in my whole time in the city. We drove to a rubbish tip beside a timber train station, untouched since the so-called *British era*, the thick awnings corroded with insect bole, a round rust-coloured clock unmoving above the entrance, looking for signs of hungry children. Shredded pieces of black plastic flapped at our approach, and fat crows stared us down, but otherwise there was stillness, just hot silence. At high noon, we reached a string of *kovils*, the intricately sculpted, intensely-coloured Hindu temples worshipped in by what remains of Colombo's Tamil population.

These too were built beside a garbage ground, dotted with small timber stalls where women sold strings of marigolds and enormous platters of tropical fruit, to leave as offerings inside the shadowed temples. Anesha pointed out the separate kovil for the women, the ripe-looking goddesses dancing along the length of each steeple, the pawpaws cut open and rotting by the door, in petition for fertility. She bought one for me. I was twenty-three, and had no babies. I also hadn't bled for three whole years. Inside, I watched a series of young women bash coconuts against their heads, then bow before a painted goddess in an alcove.

Outside, Anesha was waiting, squatting on her heels beside a woman with a small child in her lap. The child wore a faded polo-shirt, no pants, and put his fingers to his mouth

as I approached. What did I want to ask? Anesha said. The sun was beating on my back, a small, black fly crawling on my forearm, the red leather of my shoes constricting in the heat. The child kept gesturing his fingers to his mouth. His mother said that he was five years old, and wouldn't allow him to be photographed in case his school teachers and classmates found out that he was homeless.

At the other end of town, Anesha and the driver stopped for juice and cutlets, little fried fish croquettes wrapped in old school worksheets which soaked up the oil into transparent patches. I bought a bottle of water, alert and strong.

We spoke to a girl that day who lived beneath tarpaulins on the outskirts of De Soysa Circus, a sweeping boulevard near the centre of the city, which once went by the name of Lipton Circus. She was pretending to play cricket with her brothers as we approached, miming the actions of bowling and batting at a non-existent ball. She was beautiful. The skin on her shins was thick and grey and shiny. She told me that she liked to watch the women going to Odel, Colombo's large department store, just across the road, and to pretend that she was going shopping too.

I never figured out how to cope with waste in a place like Colombo, in a country where so many have so little so much of the time, where the amount I could earn in one day of resented office work would house a family for a week. How to understand hunger when it leapt so suddenly from something

abstract in the wider world, and a state suppressed within myself, to something many-faced, insistent and ever-present. Where the food that I threw out could get this child, in her undersized dress, out from underneath her tarpaulin and to school. In my first days back home, in suburban Sydney, I stood paralysed in the vegetable aisle of the supermarket, unable to choose between the six different varieties of onion. I bought cherries, in mid-winter. I didn't eat them.

Hunger is only political, only poignant when it is abnormal, when it is unusual and strange: in a place where hunger is so prevalent, one hungry child with an imaginary cricket bat was just a colour piece in the weekend section of a newspaper. But my hunger, singular and self-circling, was a crisis in my hometown. It marked me out. I was wasteful, and I was distasteful. A car with wound-down windows once shot past me on the street, someone shouting from the backseat: 'Eat a hamburger, you bitch!'

My newspaper's office, such as it was, was just off the main street of the busy suburb of Borella, the site of the 1983 riots that are generally considered the start of Sri Lanka's civil war, a war which didn't end until 2009, three years after my first visit to the country. Here, in Borella, Tamil civilians were pulled from buses and killed; here, houses and cars were burned with whole families still inside. I was born in 1983. My colleagues, my age and younger, had never lived in anything other than that war, knew peace only as

an abstract and alien thing. They hardly saw the soldiers on the street corner, leaning and leering against their rifles, the razor wire hung with drying washing, the concrete bollards. They lived in a city grown stagnant, its infrastructure unchanged because of the protracted military campaigns and clampdowns. There was a fervour the day I first brought my laptop in to work, so small and sleek beside the ancient office PCs. A doll-sized computer, my colleagues said, for a doll-sized human being. My newspaper, without a trace of irony, was called *The Nation*.

In the damp-walled *Nation* offices, we were given cups of tea each morning and early afternoon by one of the two tea-wallahs, employed purely for this purpose. It took three weeks before I learnt exactly how to ask for mine without the obligatory milk, the sugar thick enough to stand a spoon in: plain tea. 'Just leaves and water, miss?' the younger one would ask, wrinkling his high forehead in consternation. At lunchtime, one of the copy boys would often whip out his guitar and play old pop songs, barefoot, while others beat tricky percussion riffs on the edges of tables with their hands.

I was using the country, and *The Nation*, to cut my teeth. I know now that it's a fairly common practice for young and ambitious media graduates to take a placement at any one of the English-language newspapers that operate across the developing world, catering mostly to ex-pats, business people and the local Westernised elite. To come back with experience, a competitive advantage in what was, even then, a tricky industry to get a foot into. I wrote

articles about animal charities, about fashion shows, about dog grooming, and about Sri Lanka's first writers' festival, held in Galle, the southernmost city of the island, which had been badly affected by the recent tsunami. In the evenings, I went to beachside bars or Colombo's only café with other journalists, film-makers, investment bankers, all of whom had been to university overseas, and very few of whom spoke either of Sri Lanka's native languages.

It's awful and it's dubious, of course, to use an entire country as a test ground, in a kind of personal experiment. It's the same unthinking privilege that any kind of travel is predicated on for we children of the West. But I also wanted to try to be someone else for a time – to be forcibly removed from the people who knew me, from my habits, from my patterns of behaviour, my routines and rules. I thought, perhaps, that distance could defeat disease, that I could leave my home and somehow leave my self behind as well.

Most of the journalists bought rice-and-curry lunch packets from a tiny kitchen down the road; wrapped into a neat newspaper mound, there'd be a tightly packed, square prism of white rice, a daub of different curries in each corner, coconut and chilli sambal in the middle. We mixed it all together with our fingers, the turmeric staining mine nicotine-yellow. The varieties of curry changed each day, dependent on what had been harvested: to not be able to choose was as terrifying as it was liberating.

The problem for me, in Sri Lanka, was that the country's cuisine is based on two ingredients that almost always triggered my vomiting – rice and the coconut milk that binds the sauce in any curry. The first time I ate one of these lunch packets with my colleagues, I had to sprint from the tea room to the small garden at the side of the office building. I threw up onto a bed of brightly-coloured tropical flowers and tried to shake off my workmates' well-meaning concern and questions. But I know too that I told the mother of my billeted family that I was a vegetarian, my new café-set friends that I couldn't eat gluten (and we all laughed that this was a Westerner's disease) – that I was limiting my options, even then, far beyond just what I knew my stomach couldn't handle.

I'd often wander further down beyond the kitchen instead, and buy a fist-sized egg roll, a soft bun slit down the middle and filled with slices of boiled egg and bright red sauce, as well as a tomato from a street stall. It cost me the equivalent of twenty cents. I started buying two each day, and handing one to the first beggar I encountered at the bus stop near the office. One of the beggars had some kind of fluid swelling in his feet, his ankles as round and wide as tree trunks. Another had a goitre that forced her head to crick permanently sideways on her neck, like a perpetually shrugged shoulder. At first, I'd eat the other roll, painfully slowly; I remember one colleague asking me, perplexed, if that was all a typical Westerner would eat for lunch. Eventually, I started working through the lunch break, a

habit that I stuck to in the worst years of my illness for the way that this working pattern looks diligent and industrious, rather than insane.

There was a pharmacy too on the other side of the street, in the most modern and starkly tidy building in the area. It was the place my colleagues trooped to for the 'Nescafé machine', a contraption that squeezed wet and weak instant coffee out of little plastic sachets, or for packets of prawn crackers or tiny, salt-dried fish. It was here one afternoon that I was grabbed at by a woman in a sky-blue linen suit, her fingers pressing into the thin flesh of my upper arms. 'I can see you, sad little lady,' she whispered in my ear. She stared at me, unashamedly, she asked me immediately about my faith, about my marriage, both of which are non-existent. The woman grasped my arm and held my hand against her chest. 'I think that God has put me in your life today for a reason. To bless you. To make you well.' I tried to move away; but she followed me, unable as I was to blend into the background, the whole way back into the office, where the tea-wallah hustled her away.

Each day I caught two buses into work, juddering and lumbering things, occasionally riddled with holes in the floor that were plastered over with gaffer tape or cardboard. They were crowded of a morning, fuggy and sticky in the afternoon, and always full, and the crush was perfect for hiding the wandering hands of commuting men. At first, I thought the

frequent brushes against my body were accidental, and very often, they were carefully construed to leave plenty of room for doubt. One man might look like he was nodding off, his hand relaxed and floppy against the backrest of the seat, until it slowly started rubbing at my breasts. Another might hold a satchel at waist-height and then repeatedly bump against my thighs. My knees grew bruises.

Each day, I changed buses at Nugegoda Junction, where a white plaster Buddha sat smiling at the smog beneath the heart-shaped leaves of a spindly Bodhi tree. The ground was clayey and red there. Three weeks after I returned to Australia, a bomb was detonated in the dress shop on the corner.

The Sri Lankan wolf-whistle is a kind of sucking noise, fish-like through pursed lips. It took me some time to understand this, the strange sound that pursued me through the street. I'd not known before what it means to be so conspicuous, to be recognised and remembered. At a time when I was slowly being pared back to my bones, when I was every day becoming insubstantial, I've never felt so looked-at, so fully bodied.

What disturbed me most about this was how quickly I became accustomed to being looked at, even touched. My body, in public, was public. I lowered my gaze to the ground.

The women in my office nodded along when I complained. It happened to them too – most of them

found other ways to come to work, or always travelled with their families. Shezny, a wide-smiled Tamil woman, said that when she had to catch a bus alone, she'd wear an extra pin inside her sari, to jab at anyone who touched her up. 'That's great,' I laughed, 'you take a little prick all of your own!'

'No, no,' she said, bewildered. 'A sari pin is very large.'

I never saw other women walking on the streets, save for an occasional pair of white-robed nuns, holding hands and turning inward. I rarely saw other women in public at all; there was no space for their bodies in the civil life of this city. My female colleagues were unusual because they were employed, all the more so because they worked in offices instead of hospitals or schools – but even they all spoke to me about how much they wanted to get married, to find a husband, to find love. Weeks in, I realised that they were daughters until the day they became wives; they were women before they were people. They could never move beyond their bodies, never forget that their bodies were there. But here was I, living beside them in a body that was slowly disappearing, despite its new conspicuousness. They took me into their houses, taught me to cook traditional meals that take hours to prepare, and I pushed the food around on my plate, unsure whether it was more polite to not eat the meal they had served me at all, or to eat it and then throw up immediately afterwards.

My collarbones grew angular enough to become individually sunburnt.

When I left Sri Lanka, at the end of my internship and far too sick to stay, I was light-headed and felt almost absent as I walked the streets, as if everything inside my skull had been untethered. I felt that time itself had swollen in the pre-monsoon humidity and was moving in thick and syrupy globs. I was wearing a child's salwar kameez, the long shirt and baggy pants worn by the country's Muslim women, the fabric barely stretched across my shrunken breasts. I'd chosen the salwar because it was a chaste woman's clothing, the throat, the knees, the shoulders covered by brightly-coloured cloth; I had found that it deterred, at least a little, the groping hands on buses. In my first days back in Sydney, I was shocked when I saw a young woman in hotpants. The speed at which my body had taken Colombo underneath its skin surprised me. Smaller, slower-paced, and thicker-tongued, I no longer fitted neatly in the space I'd left behind.

I became obsessed with automation, with the small mechanised tasks that in Colombo had all been performed by quiet men in meticulous uniforms, that had been physical and bodied, but now were strangely abstract. Within a week I was back in my old job, driving in along the M5 through toll-gates that opened automatically in response to the infra-red tag on my front windscreen,

swiping a card to open the office building's doors, swiping again to activate a lift. My computer automatically opened the schedule of radio programs I was to monitor each day.

There was a modicum of safety, somehow, in the constant small human interactions that were still in place in Colombo's public spaces. Here, I thought, it would be easy just to disappear.

For a long time, I couldn't place exactly what it was, the thing that took so long for me to reconcile. I came home feeling different, looking diminished, and unable to tie together the two cities I now loved, and the very different ways of being that each engendered. I think now that what I struggled with was my own dreadful inconsistency, what it means to love a place and a people in the way I did Colombo, and yet to have held it at such distance, however unwittingly. In many ways, my hunger kept me separate, unable to participate fully in those myriad rituals of society and sociability that circle around food, unable to accept nourishment from the same places as the people I was living with, or from the very people I was moving amongst. Hunger forces a kind of refusal, a brutal, impenetrable independence, leaves us quite literally unable to break bread and connect with the people in our orbit; I realise now that this is how I've lived most of my adult life.

But more than this, in Colombo, my hunger was obscene. It was not predicated on need, on poverty or

parentlessness or war, corruption or greed. It was something feeding on and off itself, something always leading back into itself – the starving brain turned inwards to survive. My hunger was not, and could not, be equated with the hunger that I saw around me. Amongst so much need, my own denial was something as incomprehensible to my local friends as the hunger they lived alongside was to me. Something irreconcilable here made my world grow bigger and more disparate, and all the while, I shrank. And I shrank away as well.