

WOVEN: The Investigation is Still Ongoing

written by Guest Contributor | September 1, 2021



WOVEN is an Entropy series and dedicated safe space for essays by persons who engage with #MeToo, sexual assault and harassment, and #DomesticViolence, as well as their intersections with mental illness, substance addiction, and legal failures and remedies. We believe you. If selected for the series, we want to provide the editorial and human support such that our conversation continues long after the stories and names have changed. You can view submission guidelines for WOVEN [here](#).

Reread the [archives](#), always.

Tyger Tyger

I'm ten years old when my mother flies to India for a week-long business trip and brings back a plush tiger for my collection. At ten, I still name all the members of my plush menagerie, and I decide the tiger needs a particularly strong and fearsome name. There are three ragged stripes on its bristly cheek that look like scars; I imagine the tiger's opponent raising a clawed paw to strike, and I name my tiger *Rape*, after the action I believe the word represents.

My mother blanches when I tell her. "Name him something else," she says. "That's not a nice word."

"I thought it meant to attack, or pounce," I protest. I feel like I've done something wrong, but I'm not sure how. "Isn't that what tigers do?"

"It's not a nice word," my mother reiterates. "Pick something else."

So I rename the tiger. I don't remember the replacement name. But I remember what it felt like to know the word *rape* before I knew what it meant. A vague suggestion of violence, a shine of claws, a slash in darkness.

Exhibit B: Bastard, Before

When it all comes back, I am sitting on the windowsill of my bedroom in Kandy, Sri Lanka, watching fireflies dance through the mahogany trees. It's the third week of November 2016; I turned nineteen a month ago. I've been accepted to a handful of American colleges; I've organized my first solo art exhibition. I miss the routine and rivalry of high school, but for the most part I'm comfortable with where I am. Then realization hits, like the proverbial bolt from the proverbial clear blue sky. Tumblers turn over one by one, scattered information slots suddenly into place, a name given to the nameless. I drink numbly from a mug of gone-cold tea and try to deny it, try to shove it all back in the box, this altered reality that didn't exist in my mind minutes ago. But it won't budge. You can't put the monster back under the bed.

Downstairs, my mother is singing *how great thou art* as she flattens *chapatis*; my father is watching TV with his German Shepherd. The Game of Thrones poster above my desk tells me *valar morghulis*. All men must die.

The next day, or maybe a few days later—the chronology of this period is difficult to recall—I visit a friend's house to study for an exam that will permit our admittance to foreign universities. I sit on her bed, surrounded by bookshelves stocked with every Western fantasy series ever imported, and hint around what has happened in my mind. She's a sheltered girl, a tomboy whom the boys at school keep around like their mascot, and the things I describe are unimaginable in her fantasy realms—even if they existed, they would be accompanied by a sword, a warrior, a comeuppance. Not just this amorphous murkiness that settles across the bedroom. We go downstairs and eat the fried rice her mother has ordered from Red Dragon. I am comforted by the MSG; I say yes when she suggests watching Harry Potter after lunch. I decide not to keep talking about it.

Telling my best friend, the one I've known since we were eleven, is harder. I peed my pants in front of her and we call each other every night, but I don't have the courage to say these words. I don't even know which words to use. But because we're both writers, in the habit of sharing our work, it's not suspicious when I email her a poem and tell her to call me back after she's read it.

The poem is called *Sellang Karamuda*. It means *shall we play* in Sinhala, my mother tongue. It was what he used to say to me. I include the poem in an anthology I'm compiling, and when my mother reads the first draft, I ask four times if anything stood out to her. I mention this poem by name. I don't remember exactly what she says, just that it's not the answer I need. There's a part of me that's sick with relief and a part of me that cannot comprehend how my parents, who have Wilbur Smith and Agatha Christie on their nightstands, haven't figured this out yet. Even now, in 2021, there's an ember inside me that could be a flame if I fan it, if I dwell too long on how

and why my parents didn't see what I was screaming to tell them, on this page where I was splayed like a bumblebee in a middle school science project. It leaves me feeling like I'm shrouded in cotton wool, like the words I think I'm saying aren't actually exiting my mouth.

But my best friend gets it. She calls me back five minutes after I send her the poem. She sounds like she's standing on the edge of a cliff as she asks me, "Babe. Tell me this isn't based on real life."

And because I want so desperately for someone to understand, I push us both off the cliff. She's tearfully horrified—which terrifies me, because I'm the tearful one in our friendship—but I play it off. I thank her when she says she's here for me and she's got my back no matter which direction I want to take. I don't know which direction I want to take because I can't see a direction to go. Even though no one's ever had this conversation with me, at home or school or church, I know that this knowledge stops with my girlfriends. I know that no one else can know.

Sociological Imagination

This is where I should provide background for the audience. I should describe the convent school I attend for seven years that still feel like far longer, a gorgeous nineteenth-century establishment where the teachers tell us we are inviting sin by wearing two-piece swimsuits, where the word *love* being scrawled in a stairwell prompts an inquisition, where we are told not to be seen with boys in the back of buses under any circumstances, but especially not in school uniform. I should establish the subjective privilege of belonging to the ethnic Sinhalese majority during the tail end of a thirty-year civil war, of living in the hill country that is left mostly untouched by the unpredictable violence of the capital or the sustained horror of the north. I should express gratitude for parents who want to protect their children's innocence and therefore keep us away from the 8PM news, from the reports on suicide bombers and human rights violations and the murky morality of civil war.

I could outline the sex education we are never given and the long-lasting repercussions of that omission. The most instruction I receive is at the co-ed international school I join in the seventh grade. British textbooks approved by the Pearson Education group are distributed at the beginning of the year; among them is a text called *Introducing Moral Issues*. Fresh from convent school, I am desperate for material written in grammatically-correct English, and I read *Moral Issues* from cover to cover. It's the first time I can remember reading about condoms, same-sex relationships, drug use, STDs or abortion in anything approaching an impartial setting. *Moral Issues* is a religious studies textbook, but because the international school is secular, populated by Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and Christians alike, the textbook is never taught in class. It never occurs to me to ask an adult why. In November 2010, an overzealous parent leaks the book to the local media, which

crucifies my school with glee. The textbook is pulled, and nothing like it is ever reissued.

No one makes any effort to teach us seriously and objectively about our bodies. In ninth grade biology, we skip over the chapter about the reproductive system. Instead we are shown a video of childbirth, which is treated as though it is pornography; the girls cringe, the boys jeer, and no one takes any notes. Menstruation is taboo; one of my more humiliating memories from high school is of a male teacher hustling me disgustedly out of the crowded cafeteria because I'd bled through my skirt. Even at school, where we are supposed to be safe, there are no shortage of predators in our peripheral vision: male teachers who develop strange obsessions with certain girls, male coaches against whom no allegations are ever entertained, and male lab assistants who linger a little too long to watch the girls practising basketball after school.

No one's supposed to talk about sex – which means no one's talking about rape. Especially girls. But we talk anyway, and not everyone's parents are as circumspect about news consumption as mine. At the back of the biology lab, while the boys play havoc, we exchange stories; we share the scraps of information we have gathered from within our country and beyond. Men who use women and afterwards amuse themselves by inserting glass bottles and candles and sticks into them. Men who use women in groups. Men who use women after the women are dead. Sinhala men in army uniforms doing things to Tamil women in the North. Tamil men in terrorist fatigues doing things to Sinhala women they ambush at checkpoints. We don't say rape; we don't say consent. We cannot conceive of the spectrum in between. We can't even say *vagina* and *penis* without getting into trouble, because that language is considered cruder than the *fuck* and *bitch* the boys shout across the basketball court. We have no idea what our bodies can do, but we know how to talk around what goes wrong. We whisper about these nameless women; we know that one day we will whisper about each other. Always the women. Never the men who turn them into stories that don't make the front page.

Later, in college, I will learn that what I've just done is called the sociological imagination—the mental gymnastics I have performed in order to prepare the audience for one story, the attempt to trace how my individual experiences link to the wider social forces around me, the effort to make it make sense. None of it matters, in the end. None of it is relevant to how it began. I have been justifying, as *so many of us do*, my actions and my life after the fact. When in fact none of it is relevant, because I wasn't the one who put all this in motion.

But that's how we're trained, isn't it? That's how we're raised. I've provided the background, Your Honour. Now let me present the facts of the case.

Watership Down

I am between seven and nine. My brother is between four and six. We are at school in Kandy, and my parents have budding careers that call them to Colombo every two weeks, so we spend time with my maternal grandparents. My grandfather picks me up each afternoon from the convent school and ferries me back to the small house on the Mahaveli river, where my brother is perpetually watching cartoons. I shed that dreaded white uniform and then my brother and I bicker while my grandfather endeavours to feed us balled up mouthfuls of rice and curry. We are always more interested in the cartoons playing on TV, breathlessly following the antagonistic duos—cats and mice, rabbits and ducks, roadrunners and coyotes—who bounce back from constant bodily calamities with alarming equanimity.

I don't remember if Vijay is there at lunchtime. There is no one to ask for these details; my grandfather is dead now, and the knowledge of any of this would kill his wife. It is possible that at mealtimes Vijay is still in the kitchen, helping my grandmother wash the pots and pans while my grandfather feeds us. But after his chores are done, while our grandparents take their siesta, he plays with us. We build pretend kingdoms in the front yard out of wooden planks and tractor tires. We savour the myriad fruits of my grandparents' garden—jambu and rambutan, damson and guava. We walk down to the river, slipping through fences and cotton trees and the long cool grass of cow pastures until we reach the water's edge. The Mahaveli river claims lives sometimes, sucking bathers down into its silted grip, but for us it is a playground; we revel in the soft, gulping mud of the shallows and dangle from the smooth mango tree that angles away from the bank.

Unlike the gardeners and postmen and coconut pluckers whom my brother and I encounter in childhood, Vijay is never a stranger, even though all we know about him is that he comes from a poor village and has a scheming, lunatic mother. My grandmother gives him money at festival times; my grandfather asks him for help when he tinkers with his motorcycle. Vijay is a houseboy, and that makes him part of the household; there is a mat rolled up in the kitchen that he unfurls in the night and a toilet at the back of the house for his use. At twenty years old, he is closer to our age than anyone else with whom we spend extended time. While other men and boys are kept at a distance by dogs and dagger stares and dire warnings, Vijay occupies a strange space. Seen but unseen; not trusted, but considered too spineless to ever try anything. And so on some afternoons, while my grandfather is asleep or my grandmother is busy in the kitchen, I find myself lying on the green settee while Vijay's fingers slip into me.

It's a *rahasa*, a secret, a game known only to the hummingbirds on the batik wall hanging and the guppies flashing in the fish tank. The stakes are higher when he fetches the purple plastic wicket stumps from our cricket set and uses them to replace his fingers. Sometimes we move to the carpet in the middle of the living room, where at other times my grandfather tells us stories and sings us campfire songs. I don't know where my brother is. I don't know where my grandmother is. I don't know how this started in the first place. I don't even know what *this* is called, in English or Sinhala or Tamil. What I do know is that no one can know about this.

And no one ever finds out. The only time anyone ever comes close is when I am

in the fourth grade at the convent school. We are practising for the sports meet, and I call out to my friend Mallika. What comes out instead of her name, like those moments when some kids call for their mothers instead of the teacher, is *Vijay*.

Mallika gasps and giggles, "*Inna, kiyannang!*" or "Wait till I tell!" Years later, I will realize that she was thinking of more acceptable taboos, like a crush or a boyfriend. But I grab her arm, babbling in fear, begging her not to tell. My terror convinces her to abandon the subject. Somehow I know that the secret I'm keeping is even more shameful than the things the nuns lecture us about—wearing two-piece swimsuits or scribbling *love* on the convent walls or meeting boys at the back of crowded buses. This is something so shameful that no one even warns us about it.

The name *Vijay* means *victory* in Sanskrit; it's the name of the alleged first king of Sri Lanka, who in the 6th Century BC was expelled from India for his evildoing. Accounts vary, but *Vijaya* then sailed south to Sri Lanka and met a *yakkini* or demon woman named *Kuveni* on the coast where he landed. *Kuveni* killed or imprisoned many of the invaders until *Vijaya* himself subdued her. He subsequently had two children by her, and with the information he extracted from her, overthrew the tribe of demons to which she belonged.

In this life, *Vijay* watches evening cartoons with us, seated on a low wooden bench that he carries in from the kitchen. I am in pyjamas, settled on the same green settee where his body parts were inside me just hours ago. The Cold War era animated movie *Animal Farm* is playing. At this moment I know nothing of this story's political intricacies, but I am riveted by the scene where the donkey, *Benjamin*, chases desperately after the butcher's van bearing away his fatally injured workhorse friend, *Boxer*.

It's a touching scene—the despairing animals, the swelling music, my abuser asking me in tremulous Sinhala if *Boxer* is *Benjamin's* father. Now that the events of the afternoon have receded to the crevice in my mind where I hide things I don't understand, all I feel is superiority—because at least I can understand an English movie, because I know the difference between a donkey and a horse, because I believe I have more power at seven than this man will have in all his life. I do not know that over a decade later his influence will cross the eighteen thousand kilometres I have fled, infecting my assessment of a roomful of men, the tests of character to which I subject male friends, my need to always take the chair that faces the door.

Shellshock

I don't know what triggered that first unveiling. The internet tells me that I was the right age for it, that my mind finally decided I could handle the information, that it no longer had to protect me. Maybe it was that. Maybe it was the art exhibition I'd curated, the spectacle of all my paintings suspended from the wall, a parade of naked bandaged women hanging from nooses

in circus tents and bleeding hands stretched in supplication and everyone who was anyone in our town circling the boards and *not one person* asking me questions about why a teenager would create images like this. Maybe it was the kind of boys my generation of girls grew up with, and the ruins they made of us, with their casual betrayals and careful misogynies and calculated blackmail. Maybe I just couldn't lie to myself anymore.

I spend a year being shellshocked at odd moments. I have what I realize later are several major depressive episodes. I survive by striving to understand, in a blind, stumbling fashion—to logic my way out. I read Richard Siken's *Crush* and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's essays and Halsey's *Badlands* lyrics and Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* and Jodie Picoult's *The Tenth Circle*. I haunt fanfiction sites, long vilified by professional authors, but full of writers using familiar characters to map out their personal traumas, hidden sexualities and alternate realities. Occasionally I delve too deep into stories carrying the Rape/Non-Con tag and surface days later, shaken and fragile but bearing more evidence to add to my ever-growing stockpile. There are words on these pages that I do not know how to vocalize but hoard away in my mind, like those stories exchanged at the back of the bio lab. Proof. Testimonials. Witnesses to a war I cannot speak about. They save my sanity, long enough for me to get on the plane to America.

New Americana

Five weeks into my freshman year, I spend an afternoon sitting with three other women on the sunny quad of my Midwestern campus, comparing notes on how best to incapacitate a threatening man. After my fourth panic attack in a classroom full of strange men, one of these women tells me it's okay to go to counseling, so I pick the woman who looks kindest on the website and see her for the next four years. I attend seminars on sexual assault. I break apart reading Roxane Gay on the library floor and put myself back together reading *Brokeback Mountain* in the back of the empty chapel. I start to write like I'm not scared people will find out things about me. I meet some boys who make me feel safe; eventually, I stop revising ways to defend myself from them whenever we are alone.

The first time I go home for Christmas, I tell my parents what I can remember of what Vijay did to me—not because I want to, but because I realize my sister is the same age I was then and still visits my grandparents' house. I build up so much tension before the conversation that they think I'm about to confess to dropping out of college.

Instead, I tell them, "Don't worry, it was only some fingering," because I'm not ready to explain why I'm not sure that was all it was. This is the first time my parents and I have ever spoken about sex. *Fingering* is as much as I'm willing to say on the subject.

"I'm going to break his head open," my father declares, in the voice he uses

to swear at trishaw drivers.

"No, you're not," replies my mother, in the voice she uses on the phone with clients. She warns my aunts who have daughters to watch for this man, and tells my grandmother that Vijay is not to enter the house ever again, without telling her why. I'd rather not enter that house again either, knowing what I know, even though the green settee is long gone and the guppies are long dead. Driving back from visiting my grandmother the week before I return to America, my mother tells me that if I ever need her there, she will buy a plane ticket, and although I never take her up on it, the offer comforts me for a long time.

In my sophomore year, women around me are assaulted, one after the other, mostly by people they thought were friends. It gets to the point where I start trying to find excuses if a female friend asks me if we can get a coffee and talk about something that's *kinda fucked up*. A recording of male students discussing why they would be able to get away with sexual assault sets the campus grapevine ablaze. One survivor gets her abuser expelled from school, but hers is one of the rare successful cases. In a group of five female friends, four of us are survivors—four women in a room of twenty. I realize we are embodying the statistics from the sexual assault awareness courses the school makes us complete before registering for classes.

I go in search of more proof, more testimonials, more stories written by women who look like me. One of them is Sri Lankan author Nayomi Munaweera's novel *What Lies Between Us*. Her protagonist is a girl living in my hometown who is molested by someone close to her in childhood. So much of the story—the shame around the female body and its vulnerabilities, the double-standard placed upon women to protect themselves, the time it takes to break that kind of conditioning—rings true to me. I carry that book onto airplanes and at the same time am wary of reading it once I'm sitting next to someone, because of how much it might reveal about me to other people.

The summer before my junior year, my parents and I visit the north of Sri Lanka with their friends. The friends are former Navy, which means we are their guests at the main Navy base in Jaffna. Because of their status, there are unknown uniformed men in every room and a plain clothes officer serving as our tour guide, and I do not breathe for four days, while what was supposed to be my first pilgrimage to the post-war north becomes an exercise in hypervigilance. In the periphery of my fear, I am aware that the women and girls we pass on the street and in the kovils, with their shining plaits of black hair and long skirts over fast bicycles, have far more right to this terror. I hear my parents and their friends discussing how during the war mothers would marry off their teenage daughters because it meant they would be less likely to be raped by soldiers and/or terrorists.

I recall the conversations at the back of the biology labs and realize anew the scope of how far this goes and also how much I still can't comprehend. I might spend four days grinding my teeth so hard that the enamel comes off, safe behind the windows of my father's car, but these women don't have the luxury of running away as I can do. These women faced things I can barely even imagine. At the same time, everything I've taught myself in the post-

Hashtag TimesUp has shown me that sexual violation isn't something that can be quantified. That it means something different to every survivor. That I can't help anyone else until I help myself. I leave Sri Lanka that summer angrier than I've been in a long time, conscious that I might not be able to return until I find a direction in which to channel my rage. That my anger is justified, but ultimately counts towards nothing concrete.

Lisbeth Salander

I'm twenty-two the first time I share a bed with a man; long overdue by American standards but scandalously premature by South Asian social norms. It's April 2020; the pandemic is ravaging the state, and I am marooned on the deserted college campus, along with the rest of the international students. One of them is Dawit, originally from Addis Ababa; he's the most trusted male friend I have. One night I'm at his apartment and the thunderstorm outside is too wild to risk walking home. He offers me his roommate's empty bed. I make one of the rare snap decisions of my life and choose his own bed instead, with him in it. It's not until the next morning, waking up with his arm around me and his fingers still threaded through mine, that I realize I never made a checklist of all the ways I could try to incapacitate him if I needed to get away. For six weeks I fall into a holding pattern of showing up at his door, drifting off in his bed to the sound of video game gunfire, and slipping away the next morning when the chapel bells become too insistent to ignore.

It's at this point that I would clarify to the audience that we never have sex. The few friends of mine who find out ask me *why the hell not*, some more crassly than others. These inquiries fill me with a wordless rage at the irony of trying to find ways for girls like me to talk about sex, and then being asked to justify why I *wasn't* sexual with someone. I don't have the words to explain that for me, being able to fall asleep facing a wall with my back to a man, without having told anyone else where I was spending the night, without a kitchen knife within arm's reach, wasn't something I ever imagined stumbling into. I don't have the words to explain that Dawit making the kind of crude sexual gesture my friends describe would have shattered something in our friendship, would have set me back years in terms of trust. I don't have the words to explain that those scattered nights of not being alone in the violet darkness and taking synchronous breaths and fitting someone else's knees behind mine were a bodily anomaly. That the rest of the time, my body is still something I'm always ready to sheathe and armour and obscure, no matter what I'm wearing; something inviolate and impenetrable and utterly lonely.

I watch *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* two weeks later. It's the version that features Rooney Mara and Daniel Craig as protagonists Lisbeth Salander and Mikael Blomkvist. Later I'll read the critical reviews of how the film's producers handled and mishandled its depictions of sexual assault, sexuality, and survivorhood; I will be unable to form my own judgement, because I cannot

watch the central rape scene all the way through. Later I'll learn that there's a category that this film may or may not blend into—*rape-revenge*, a genre that generates thinkpieces questioning its validity and utility and morality. Later I'll compile a list of women I watch on the days when no matter what I do, my body feels exposed to attack from every side—Olivia Wilde in *A Vigilante*, Sridevi Kapoor in *Mom*, Olga Kurylenko in *Quantum of Solace*, Zoe Saldana in *Colombiana*. All of their characters are both shattering apart and surviving in equal measure—their shards form a mosaic in which I can see my own reflection, in certain lights, on certain days.

But in that month and a half I relate to Mara's Lisbeth more than I have to any fictional character in years. She feels like both a warning and a vindication; she feels like what I could have become, if I'd been lost enough or brave enough. She smokes. She rides a motorcycle. She gets tattoos and piercings left and right. She's most herself when she's behind a computer. She takes cold, calculated revenge on her rapist. She's all edges. It reminds me of the few attempts I made towards annihilating the body everyone else knew me by in the hope that I could rebuild something that belonged to me—cutting off sixteen inches of hair a week before graduating high school, buying a black leather jacket and a pair of ankle boots at twenty-one and wearing them to every class, letting the clothes in my closet, flamboyant and foreign and obviously feminine at first, creep slowly towards the monochrome and andronymous, my silhouette becoming streamlined, curated, camouflaged. I have a different facade now, one that I curate just as carefully, but Lisbeth makes me wish for that bare-bones armour I once wore.

There are other times when I wish I could go further. When I wish that I had the lung capacity to smoke, or the weight class to drink, or the abandon to get high. A crutch, a cast, something to fall upon when I feel too desperate to stay contained by my skin. When the inside of my brain feels like a nest of live wires, when I want to turn myself inside out with the force of how much I despise my body for making me vulnerable, when I want to make myself so sharp that anyone who touches me might cut themselves to pieces.

Still, like me, like any of us, Lisbeth Salander isn't unhappy all the time. Isn't all edges all the time. Beyond the vigilante with eyes outlined in tar is someone in the trailing clutches of childhood. She chooses McDonald's Happy Meals over anything a five-star hotel can offer. Her face lights up in a club under the gaze of a beautiful woman who thinks she's pretty. At the end of the film, there's a shot of her sitting on the floor, carefully addressing a Christmas card to Daniel Craig's craggy journalist. The picture on the card is a winter-jacketed child petting the nose of a large, soft-nosed horse.

I think, sometimes, about telling Dawit about this visual, but I never do, especially after we stop spending the night together. I don't say out loud that in those strange days when his room is the only place I stop wanting to scratch myself out of my skin, I feel like Lisbeth too, slowly finding one space to fit, one night to not be vigilant, one moment to indulge in bodily trust. A place we chose for ourselves. A place where we could simultaneously be conscious of our bodies and forget their existence. A place where we allowed our bodies to be vulnerable in someone else's presence, and were able

to leave safely in the light of morning, dizzy with the absence of shame and pain. A place where we *wanted* to be vulnerable.

Rough Justice

I see Vijay again only once, just before leaving for America the first time. I come out of my bedroom one morning and from my doorway I can see into the kitchen downstairs. He is standing at the breakfast island. He has aged; in my mind he was a youth, but now there is gray in his hair. I realize then just how much older than me he must have been. He'd been a man. I'd been a child. He is wearing a shirt the colour of a manioc sack. He has come to beg my mother for money. My mother has her back to him; it's five months before I will be able to tell her what happened. I back into my room, lock the door, and stand with my teeth sunk into the flesh of my arm until I hear him leave.

Sometimes over the years, I have imagined seeing him again. I have imagined the words I would say as I delivered a roundhouse kick to the scrotum in my grandmother's front yard, my family looking on, my brother preventing righteous elders from rushing in. Sinhala is a vitriolic language sometimes; English cannot compare. In Sinhala, it is easy to slash someone down to the scum of the earth. Easier still when the person in front of you was born in a hovel. In those imaginings, class and ethnicity become twin cudgels in my hands, swung with maximum force and zero regret.

I indulge in this fantasy against the advice of my counselor because the reality is that justice in the legal sense of the word is something I will never get. I was in America when #MeToo exploded, when Simone Biles spoke out about Larry Nassar, when Taylor Swift went on the cover of Time with women labeled *silence breakers*, when Dr. Christine Blasey Ford put her life on the line to tell the world the truth about Brett Kavanaugh. It was hard enough for these women to pursue justice, despite the ability they had to speak in public, to pursue their case in the courts, to have others to support them. Some of them didn't succeed. But Sri Lanka is another story altogether. Its judiciary system moves at a glacial pace even when it doesn't involve sexual assault cases with minimal evidence—and I have no proof at all. I would need to remain in the country to even carry out the process, which would mean undoing the life I'm pursuing elsewhere. It makes sense that neither I, nor my parents, or my Sri Lankan friends, ever considered legal action seriously. Pursuing a case against him would have been like squeezing blood from a stone. So why even consider it? Why think about something that isn't going to happen? Why indulge in the fantasy of rough justice?

There are so many reasons. The knowledge of how old I was exactly and what else happened and how long it went on has never come back, but the fact remains that I was seven and eight and nine and some hideous things happened to me and if they hadn't happened, that little girl might have been a whole different person. When the convent nuns said she was full of original sin and wearing short skirts would make her dirty, she might not have believed them.

When damaged, dark-eyed Sri Lankan boys tried to fix themselves by breaking her, she might have given them the beating they deserved. When she was told she couldn't wear a sports bra to run on the beach in 90 degree heat because men would try to attack her, she might have put on her sunglasses and gone running anyway.

Then there's also this. He was the first. He's the one I'm ready to talk about. But he wasn't the last. His was the most prolonged violation—but there are things that happened to me, things I forgot about or compartmentalized or buried down deep because I didn't have the words to name them, that are cast in a new light the longer I look. Every woman has stories like this. Some of them last moments. Some of them last far longer. But they're all violations, all on that spectrum between rape and consent. All of them are crimes—if only we had the recourse to get justice. In the absence of that, I am trying to do everything I can to make sure there aren't any more violations. For me, or anyone else. I am doing everything I can, and yet there's always a reason to stop, or do it differently.

Take krav maga lessons—but don't advertise the fact, because it will tempt someone to teach you a lesson of their own, test how much you really know. Educate your male friends—and risk alienating them by making them feel uncomfortable. Talk about your experience as an act of activism—and risk being accused of performing your suffering, capitalizing off a cultural moment, seeing demons where there are none, getting in the way of living your own life, not doing enough. Be hypervigilant—and spoil everyone else's fun with your need to see danger everywhere.

Stay angry enough to keep fighting—and risk alienating everyone you know with your refusal to *let the past go*.

Which brings us to the question of why I wrote this essay. What I told it this way. *Point, evidence, explanation*. Why all I can really offer on the details of abuse is at best a paragraph. *He was inside me*. Why I've packaged these passages under subtext-laden subheadings of which a creative writing workshop would be proud. *It makes it seem like it happened to someone else*. Why I spent so much time dwelling on the sociological imagination. *I have to defend myself before I even begin to accuse him of something he did*.

I know nothing I've said will fit the audience's expectations. I haven't met my patriotic obligation to present my own country in a positive light on the Western stage. I haven't been inclusive enough or woke enough or political enough, as behooves one with my American college education. I haven't been kind in my depictions of the other people involved. I've spent thousands of words ruminating over something that happened over a decade ago, obscuring something I only remember instances of behind crafted language. I have no great confrontation to offer. No great act of activism. So why have I written this story?

Because it happened to me. Because it happened to me. Because it happened to me.

I thought about changing the emphasis on any of these words or perhaps doing

away with the repetition altogether, because *would the audience really put up with that* and then I thought to hell with the audience. To hell with the fourth wall.

Because it happened to me. Because it happened to my friends. Because it's still happening. Because it's *unoriginal* in the sense that *everyone* has heard a story like this—and that shouldn't be the case. That's what I've got. I don't have to give you statistics. I don't have to provide proof. The proof is in the damage done. In the chances missed. In the fear I push through every single day—to leave the house alone after dark, to fall asleep, to write these words. The girls of my generation and I, we could have been unafraid, we could have been confident in our bodies, we could have been armed with knowledge. But we weren't. And the vast majority of us still can't talk about it. Some of us haven't realized it happened to us. Some of us won't listen or believe or make time when someone else tells us they realized it happened to them. I've been all of those people; I've been the person who said, *not today, I'm too traumatized to listen to you talking about your trauma, and it's not your fault or mine and it sucks, but I'm sorry, I can't, we'll have coffee next week*. I'm complicit too.

So I'm talking about *it*. For everyone and anyone who isn't there yet. It's my turn to pass on the intel that someone will share at the back of a bio lab or scrawl on a convent wall or write in the sand of a Jaffna beach. It's my turn to offer proof that someone else can clutch close to their chest while they gather the strength to remember or report or escape or fight or live. In the absence of a true reckoning, that's what I can do. Stay angry enough to fight. Stay alive. Be the living proof.

State of Play

In the present day, I live in an upstairs flat with a clear line of sight on all sides. It's not the safest place I've ever lived, but it's very close. I keep a pair of sneakers by the window in case I need to get away, and a knife by the bed in case I can't get away in time. The pandemic means I haven't gone home in almost two years, but I also know I can't go home without a way to escape. I'm not ready to be surrounded by constant reminders. I'm not ready to have to fight for every single scrap of respect and privacy and bodily autonomy. Not if I have another option.

Right now, the other option means that occasionally I can work out in nearby parks. It's 90 degrees Fahrenheit. I wear a sports bra. I lie flat on my back and lift my legs over my head until my toes touch the ground behind my ears. I am aware that to be in public in this position and to remain unmolested is a privilege; I am aware that to a certain kind of person I look like I am inviting penetration. I am also aware of how much I feel like a child again. How being able to let my body bend as far as it can, to allow it to make loud grunts and sighs of exertion, to take it dancing in the summer sunlight, to let it walk the forest paths home in a rain-drenched twilight, all reminds me

of being young enough to play in the muddy shallows of the Mahaveli. Of how it felt to not hate being inside my body. This is something I didn't even know I had to get back.

I still don't know how much I've lost. I don't know what I will rediscover. I still don't always have the right words.

The investigation is still ongoing.



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