Nala

In Search of a Way

by

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A thesis
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Architecture

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2024
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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Bound within two units in a strip of industrial warehouses, the Hindu temple of my youth is a compromise of the ancient to the Canadian. A temple birthed by necessity, it exists in a state of purgatory, doomed to be abandoned for its purpose-built replacement.

But this story of assimilation is complicated by an architectural model, resting at its entrance foretelling an alternate fate. With walls devoid of compromise, mirroring its predecessors of antiquity, this miniature depicts the very temples its Eelam Tamil patrons were once forced to flee.

This model was sculpted as a promise for the future, but I argue that this tool acts also as a gateway to the past. And by using this artifact to decipher the temple's purpose, this body of work unknowingly unravels the second-generation Eelam Tamil-Canadian's conception of home.

Inspired by Hindu and Tamil storytelling, this investigation is disseminated as an epic, told in three parts where the reader follows Nala. A second-generation youth poached from his world by a Goddess, Nala treks a fantastical land in search of an escape. In the course of his exile, Nala navigates conflicting signs of home, while confronting his temple, childhood protests, and the war on memory in post-war Sri Lanka. The youth learns through his pilgrimage and a cast of imperfect characters how the warmth of his coveted home is intertwined with that of his temple's.

The story of Nala intends to unearth the potential of the Hindu-Canadian temple for the second-generation Eelam Tamil-Canadians held captive by the question of home.

Acknowledgments

I wish to begin by first acknowledging the land on which these words were written, a reminder that in my own search for home, I am also a settler on stolen ancestral land. The initial inception of this story began at the School of Architecture – its building situated on the traditional territory of the Attawandaron, the Anishinaabe, and the Haudenosaunee peoples. The University's main campus is situated on the Haldimand Tract, the land promised to the Six Nations that includes six miles on each side of the Grand River. The latter stages of this story were completed from the district of North York, which sits on the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, and the Mississaugas of the Credit River.

It was only after understanding that when I mourned my mother's land, another community mourned in unison for the land I continued to occupy, that I was reminded of my complacency, but also the universality of this search – that my struggle is not my struggle alone.



This journey is a product of countless invaluable conversations, and as such, I am in debt to the guidance of the following voices.

To Robert Jan, for his wisdom and belief in where these words would go. Thank you for trusting in my intuition in my search for something meaningful. To Jaliya, for teaching me what it means to truly listen. Thank you. This journey only found its light knowing that you were not too far. To Anwar, for her ability to empathize and see what I could

not. Thank you for reminding me who I am and where this journey was bound to go. To Nedra, for her words that summed where I now stand. Thank you for all that you do for our people, and for the reminder that these words are not the end. And to the many professors, adjuncts, administrators, and staff, including Andrew who started this all – thank you for all that you have and continue to do to nurture and care for our community.

To my friends that Rome graciously granted – Andy, Fion, Iryna, and Jane – thank you for giving me the courage to return, for making me believe in second chances.

To Ali, for his ability to see beauty in a world that many see barren. Thank you for sharing your sight with me, and continuing to uplift the mundane.

To Dhisana, for her enduring spirit that I continue to rely on to strengthen my own. Thank you for never leaving my side, for being the sister I never had.

To Safaa, for her unwavering compassion that we are all undeserving to receive. Thank you for being our beacon of warmth, for leading when others would not.

To the many friends of Room 3002 who made each day a little brighter: thank you for breathing life into these past three years, I will treasure each moment for the rest of my life.

To my *appa* and Aagash, for their resilience, and understanding for why I returned. Thank you for believing in this meandering journey. I hope I made you both proud.

And finally to Yu Xin, for granting me the confidence to find who it is I am. These words cannot exist without your care and belief in me. Your love was always the difference.

Dedication



Fig. 1. Amma (mother in Tamil)

To *amma*.

To my mother.

My first home.

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A Note from the Author

Introduction

Dear Reader,

It is for some time that I have questioned the nature of my graduate pursuit and the purpose that has compelled me to craft the story ahead. I tell you this because each time I unraveled my intentions, I would be swayed again by another path this journey had quietly conjured. So as an introduction, I will tell you, Reader, of how this piece came into fruition, in hope that I can translate what has driven me to its completion. Uprooted will be what grounds the words you will soon read, and how this story and the journey to write it are all but the same.

While formally this journey began in September of 2021, its seeds were first sown three years before. As a student of the late Andrew Levitt, it was under his third-year design studio that I was given my first opportunity to explore the architecture that still moves me.

While the exact prompt that led me to Sri Varasiththi has certainly been lost to time, in hindsight, it was Andrew's insistence that implored me to consider its doors. Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar is a Hindu temple based in Scarborough, Ontario, and its proximity to the Eelam Tamil



Fig. 2. Entrance garage and exterior view of *Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar Hindu Temple of Toronto*, Scarborough, ON



Fig. 3. Interior view of *Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar Hindu Temple of Toronto*, Scarborough, ON

community made it the definitive temple for many my age. During my youth, as a Tamil-Hindu, I would visit a wealth of temples across Ontario, but it was Sri Varasiththi I would frequent – and where as a one-month old, I was fed my first grain of rice. But what drew me, as a third-year student of architecture, was not initially these childhood ties, but the location of its cosmic plan within two units in a strip of warehouses.

This architectural typology is not limited to the Hindu temple, there being hundreds of documented cases of sacred spaces adopting industrial skins in order to exist. One need not look far in the Greater Toronto Area to find churches, mosques, and gurdwaras that have occupied similar reductive spaces to service either their marginalized or growing communities. These communities are typically unable to afford the grandeur and freedom that their ancient rules dictate, and so a new form of sacred space was inadvertently born from their assimilation.

Sri Varasiththi adopted a novel identity embracing this dichotomy, and so its mystery – that as a child I dismissed – was what I brought to Andrew in hopes to unpack.

For our first discussion, our class was asked to produce a singular image to explain to our peers the direction we hoped to take the subject we had chosen. It eludes me for what reason, but I created a collage of Sri Ganapathi, where He was placed within an industrial warehouse set only to black.

It is clear, as I reflect on this image that was devoid of the vibrant palettes and warmth of my temple, that I did not know what had compelled me to share Sri Varasiththi as my muse. And this would become further apparent in the weeks soon to follow, as I would become outright disinterested in



Fig. 4. Sanctum sanctorum (*garbhagriha*) of *Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar Hindu Temple of Toronto*

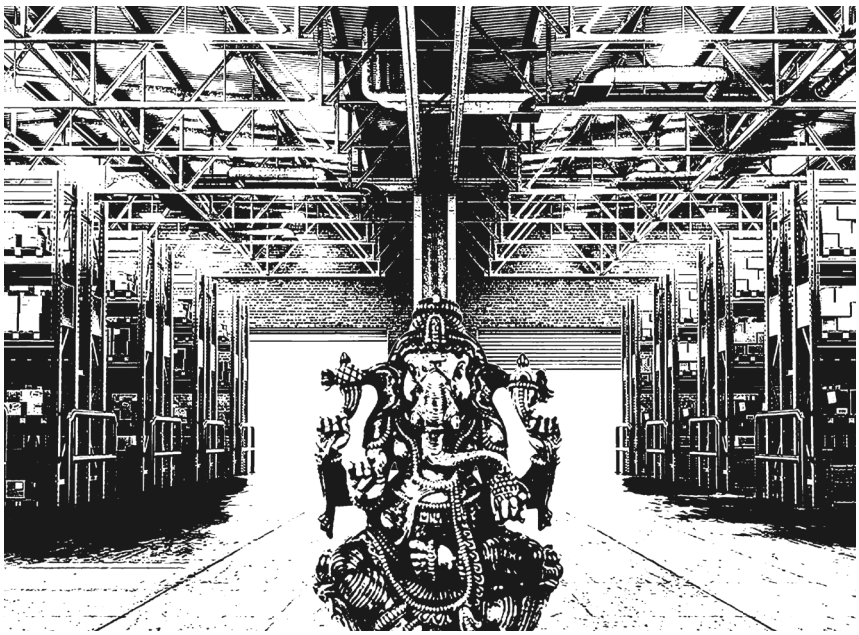


Fig. 5. Collage of *Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar Hindu Temple of Toronto*, 2016

the marvel of the 'temple in the warehouse.' My gaze would instead drift to another temple in Scarborough's suburbs: Sri Ayyappa Samajam of Ontario, a purpose-built Hindu temple, that would become the subject of this studio.

The purpose-built Hindu temples of the Greater Toronto Area align closer to their ancient predecessors, given their enhanced freedom to refuse Western compromise. These temples, not bound to the adaptive-reuse of forgotten spaces, were erected from the ground-up, allowing them to tower over their renowned figures. The purpose-built temple is understood by Hindu communities as the final form of the transitionary temple – a term that I will use to describe Sri Varasiththi and temples built to similar constraints. These transitionary temples exist in a realm akin to purgatory, waiting patiently in industrial yards to one day be abandoned for the purpose-built.

Sri Ayyappa was established in 2009 on the lessons learned from the transitionary temples, but as a frequent worshipper, I had many issues that I hoped to address under Andrew's guidance. And while I did broker an improved compromise between its ancient codes and their Canadian context, I completed this term flustered, wondering if I had answered the right question.

In retrospect, I think back to my collage and how after its presentation, I had removed Sri Varasiththi entirely from my scope of interest. Was it because a transitionary temple was only a placeholder in my mind? Or was it because a part of me considered this temple already complete?

While I will not delve into detail the two years that followed, to illustrate why the temple speaks to me, I must provide a glimpse into my upbringing. This retelling, dear Reader, comes from my inability to admit at first the importance of



Fig. 6. Gopuram and exterior view of *Sri Ayyappa Samajam of Ontario*, Scarborough, ON

this thread, as a piece of this journey would be missing were I not to mention my late-mother.

My mother was a devout Hindu, the temple and its teachings were always in her reach. She preached its laws and doctrines, raising my younger brother and I to its code. But in 2003, when I was only a child, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and suddenly, my family followed her footsteps as she wandered Ontario's temples. What began as a search for a divine elixir to cure her ailing health, would continue even after her miraculous recovery as prayers the cancer would not return. And so, temples such as Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar and Sri Ayyappa Samajam were where I found myself for the first two decades of my life.

However, this perspective would change while attending my first-year at the School of Architecture, when in 2015, the cancer metastasized, returning to her body with unrelenting aggression. For the next four years, my mother would fight each diagnosis that would pile at her feet, as my family and I would again wander hospitals and temples, each visit with renewed purpose. Then came the day where we were informed all treatments had been exhausted. My mother would pass away in her sleep in the summer of 2020.

The proposal I made for Andrew was the only project my mother revered, a connection I had surely planned from the beginning, though was not entirely conscious about. My last conversation with Andrew was detailing this importance. He was leading my fourth-year studio, when my mother passed away a month into its introduction.

I thanked him for giving me the opportunity to begin this wayward journey, that his studio had begun a pilgrimage, and my mother had blessed its path before she had left. Andrew flashed his stoic smile, before telling me he too had

been thinking of my temple, as I told him, just as I told my mother, I would return to continue what I had begun.

I still remember the e-mail that informed the School of Andrew's condition, and in truth, I am still unable to process his passing a year later.

I share this all to be transparent because I began my studies in a state of grief, and this grief, you will soon see Reader, binds the story that lies ahead. When I re-entered the doors of Waterloo, it was not just me and my temple alone, as I would confront its purpose led by the teachings of the two that had inspired me to question it.

Three years ago I resumed this piece, beginning again where I had left it with Andrew, but by then I was certain I had no desire to fix the purpose-built temple. Instead I aspired to document the transitionary temple of my childhood, to give these structures the legitimacy that I sorely knew they deserved. I analyzed the beginnings of Sri Varasiththi and many similar temples across Ontario, and how the growth of their dedicated communities prompted purpose-built temples slowly to follow. But as I perplexed over this timeline and how it ran parallel to the stability of the diaspora, I felt unsatisfied as if this truth was only a fragment of a larger story.

This dissatisfaction only began to crumble when I thought back to my first collage and my simplification of Sri Varasiththi as just a 'temple in a warehouse.' It was this reflection that made me aware of how I spoke of my temple aloud – as a kitsch object imported from the Orient. I spoke through the voice of an outsider.

I presented an image of my temple that was devoid of any emotion, a successful example of immigrants assimilating

with no comment on why it exists. And it was this framing that made me reject the narrow gaze of the 'objective' researcher, as I would trek this journey, from that point forward, as a second-generation Eelam Tamil-Canadian.

While descending this new path I remained dedicated to the course of my initial analysis, and it was when I combed through the design of Sri Varasiththi that I became entranced by an architectural model at its doors.

In the profession of architecture, the model is a tool used as a means of projecting through time, as whether to the past or the future, the model serves as a tangible means of imagining. But this model, acting also as a donation box, was unlike any purpose-built temple. It showcased an architecture free of compromise, one that mirrored the temples of antiquity.

It was at the uncovering of this model, and reflecting as a youth from the community it served, that a critical question was posed that propelled the story ahead. Is this model of a future temple, of a purpose-built temple to replace Sri Varasiththi? Or, is this a memorial to the past, a call to its Eelam Tamil patrons to return home?

It was this question, derived from the model, that dictated my new direction, that if I could understand this miniature, I could understand the temple and why I was drawn to it. And so in an effort to decipher this model and where in time it pointed towards, for the first time in my life, I swayed my attention to unpacking the history of my people.

The history of the Eelam Tamils was never recited aloud in my household, as my father tells me that my mother believed it was always too soon to tell her children. But you see, Reader, this pain still held a defining presence in



Fig. 7. Architectural model by the entrance of *Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar Hindu Temple of Toronto*



Fig. 8. Interior of architectural model within *Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar Hindu Temple of Toronto* with donations

my upbringing, and I am certain many my age can attest that they too knew of the blood that spilled. As while we were spared from the puzzle of how our history was weld together, we were instead given glimpses of the crimes that led to our Canadian birth. From the gruesome centrefolds of weekly newspapers, to the desperate mumbles beneath temple prayers, the suffering of our people thousands of miles away always existed in our periphery.

I recall still an interview I conducted with my mother for a fourth grade assignment, where I brought forth basic questions pertaining to the reason behind her migration. I would receive only vague answers and misdirections from the truth. I would learn from a young age that there were certain answers I could only obtain through observation.

And so as I traversed my people's history, from the dissolution of colonial Ceylon to the rise of the Eelam Tamil diaspora, a memory continued to return of when I had first unknowingly embraced this pain. I remembered at age 11 attending the 2009 protests across Toronto, a memory of a procession led by grief, anger, and desperation.

I do not recall having any pretext to why we marched through the winter cold, but I recognized its importance from the chants and banners we marched beneath. But it is only now that I realize that we marched to the climax of 26 years of war, that this was the moment my mother's generation first openly shared their pain with mine.

I was never informed when the war ended, only when the protests stopped, as until the end I was protected from learning too much of my parents' pain. And so as I read into the massacre that took place across the caged lagoons of Mullivaikal, I felt a deep shame in my obliviousness for

not mourning in the streets with my people.

From Mullivaikal, I traversed the past with the history I had uncovered, discovering how centuries of colonialism evolved into the last stand for Eelam in Toronto's streets. I began to utilize the model as a memorial to my people – a reminder of all the pain my community had endured.

I first spoke with Robert Jan in December of 2021, who during our first discussion posed a pivotal observation that I continue to reckon with. As while detailing the prolific Mother's Day protest, where the community ascended the Gardiner Expressway in Toronto, I described this act of desperation as a protest by 'them,' and not by 'we.' While I intended to correct Robert Jan that I was not in fact present on that highway, I stopped myself once I realized that this was not the point he had tried to make. A month later, he would become my supervisor and a voice of reason and patience – a vital figure to the journey that you, Reader, now actively read.

After this conversation and my own reflection on my naivety, I envisioned this piece no longer as a historical or comparative analysis. That what I continued to derive from the model required a medium suitable for self-discovery, so I decided I would instead write a memoir, documenting my first pilgrimage to Sri Lanka.

I never visited Sri Lanka, Reader, and to this day I still have not, as each plan I put forward would be disrupted by what I can only attribute to a divine force. My mother would always dream of taking my brother and I to her homeland, but the unpredictability of my family's lives never granted her the luxury to return. Two years ago, my father and I walked through Google's Street View together, only for him

to leave frustrated, unable to navigate the home that he had left. My father has not stepped on his land in over 30 years, and to this day he still dreams of the soil he left behind.

It was shortly after this incident that I asked my father if he wished to join me in Sri Lanka, and as if in reaction to this proposal, the *Aragalaya* protests took the island by storm. The 2022 protests – a response to the economic instability and corruption that had spiraled after the war – saw the topple of the very leadership responsible for the genocide of my people. But these marches had no interest in the plight of the Eelam Tamils, instead exclusively attending to the demands of the majority, while leaving calls for reconciliation unaddressed.

I recall speaking with Robert Jan, frustrated over Western coverage, at their omission of the parallel, decade-long protests by Eelam Tamils demanding accountability. I remember then returning home to resume my study of the 2009 protests, to find every Google search I would perform superseded by images of their victorious march.

The decision to write a memoir was dependent on this pilgrimage, but the *Aragalaya* protests and the economic strife they emerged from, made travel an impossibility. But what this obstacle revealed was a glimpse into post-war Sri Lanka, as I became entrenched in the present, and how Eelam Tamils strive to remember on a divided island.

I navigated through desecrated memorials, cemeteries, and relics of the war, as I studied the vast number of architectures of memory that were created by and for Eelam Tamils. But of all these fallen temples, before, during, and after the war, none were retold as often as the burning of the Jaffna/ Yalpanam Public Library.

Burned in 1981 with over 95,000 texts in circulation, this bibliocide is understood as one of the greatest crimes against the Eelam Tamils. Though it was revived again as a library in 2003, what was lost, and the state hands it was lost to, have yet to be forgotten or forgiven.

But what drew me to this library was the way it continued to be upheld. As by visitors, patrons, and romantics, it was seen as a national library for the unrealized Eelam. This was a library intended to protect the legacy of my people, and by the way in which they were drawn to it, I realized I gravitated similarly to my own temple. I only became certain that I had uncovered my people's sanctum when I found protecting its doors, a statue of the Goddess of Learning, Sri Saraswathi. As while the temple was erected as an abode to protect the Gods, Yalpanam Public Library was a temple protected by Them.

I had in some way traversed through a model from a temple to a library, and together, each step of this journey made clear that my search was in fact for a home. As a second-generation Eelam Tamil, what I perceived as home was always in question, and the temple it seemed had begun a journey towards some meaningful truth.

The definition of home is boundless. It can be a place or even a feeling. It was while navigating this vastness that I found the interconnected nature of temples, protests, and libraries. As I found, when strung together, these homes shared the act of storytelling, which would propel me towards the piece that you, Reader, will soon come to read.

What is a temple, but not a keeper of stories, where stories of the Gods paint its sacred walls? What is a protest, but not a keeper of stories, where voices plead for their stories to

be heard? And what is a library, but not a keeper of stories, where the stories of lifetimes are passed between generations? It was then that I was certain that I was bound to tell a story, and that the memoir was no longer an appropriate medium.

It was during this time that I had begun reading a story that was said to have burned in the Yalpanam Public Library, a critical Hindu text that I was not recited to as a child. I had stumbled upon Valmiki's *Ramayana*, in the hopes of learning how to tell a story, but instead, I was drawn into Rama's world, producing a tale that extended from His magic.

The *Ramayana*, along with the *Mahabharata*, is understood as *itihasa* or history, stories that are essential to how Hindus learn the foundation that forms their religion. The *itihasa*, a form of *smriti*, takes the philosophies and doctrines of the Vedas and layers them into stories, allowing for even the metaphysical to be understood by a child.

The *Ramayana*, or the way of Rama, is then a simple narrative with a complex message that resonates to a different frequency based on the stage of life it is first read. To the child, it is a story of Rama and his rescue of his love, Sita, from the rakshasa-king, Ravana. But to the matured, it is a story that defines *dharma* and what it means to walk the path of righteousness. What I intend with the story ahead is to provide two similar, weaving paths – a story with a simple narrative that speaks to home as Valmiki spoke to *dharma*.

But what first attracted me to the *Ramayana* was not this disguised subtext, but the kingdom of Ravana in Lanka, understood universally as Sri Lanka. The rakshasa-king describes his kingdom as a jewel within the sea, but during the war, to my people, Sri Lanka was a drop of blood, and today, remembered as a tear.

As I continued to read the *Ramayana*, I would converge on another moment, this leading me to Nala, the protagonist of the story ahead. Nala, a *vanara*, is a minor character in the *Ramayana*, and is the son of Viswakarman, the divine architect of the Devas. It is said that when Rama learns that Sita is imprisoned in Lanka, He is unable to cross the sea from Bharat (present-day South India) to the shores that imprisoned His love. And so, Nala is said to have designed the bridge from Bharat to Lanka for their army, and it is allegedly said to still exist today under the name Nala Setu.

It is learning of Nala as an architect that I first imagined the epic ahead, as his discovery was the last piece to resolving how I would tell my winding tale. The story ahead extends from the *Ramayana* and forges its path from a forgotten model as a protest, a library, and a temple collide to tell what is home for the second-generation Eelam Tamil-Canadian.

The story of Nala is divided into three Books. Book I, *Our Temple is Our Stories*, is an exploration on storytelling and the anxieties of two generations, while Book II, *Our Procession is Our Protest*, speaks explicitly to the Civil War's climax and the protests by the diaspora. Finally, Book III, *Our Sanctum is Our Temple*, speaks to the library, post-war Sri Lanka, and the *Ramayana*, with each Book inching closer to answering what is home and is it possible to ever find it.

I had initially hoped to create a Book IV to detail Nala's journey in Eelam, but unable to visit Sri Lanka myself, this piece will end without the youth exploring his land. Please note, Reader, that I tried my earnest to write Book IV, but my imagination could not conquer the emotions I needed to bring Eelam alive. But I have still included a concluding chapter, *Our Home is Our Temple,* where Nala will meet the Goddess, detailing where I have always intended this story

to end. My hope is that this will provide some closure to a story that still continues, and at the very least, demonstrate where my path currently rests.

The last two details I must describe to you is that you will find a fluctuating rhythm dictating the story, as this epic was initially written to be orated to an audience as one would in a temple. Taking from the tradition of oral storytelling that descends from Vedic origins, this story is meant to be spoken aloud, and was narrated in part at its defence. Further, the history of the Eelam Tamils to use poetry to express grief and resistance, cemented that my words needed to be translated through similar rhythmic prose.

Alongside these Books, Reader, you will also find drawings provided as frontispieces, with the intention that they become the temple's artwork that one's eyes fixate upon when recited to. This drawing is to act as a map into Nala's exile, but also his universe – to be the hand that you hold as you listen to my words.

The purpose of this story, as you can see, cannot be easily narrowed. It is a story of discovering, grieving, remembering, overcoming, but at its centre, it is a story that deciphers a model. It asks this model why its temple continues to move its children, and in its course attempts to uncover what home it signals is theirs. But I cannot, in good will, promise that all these answers will be given to you in this story. Instead, what I will promise is that you will leave understanding the compounding anxieties that make who I am. And above all you will understand what my intentions were when I told both my mother and Andrew that I would return to Waterloo to complete what I began.

The story ahead is far from complete, in fact it continues

even to this day. It beckons me to explore, to question all that I feel, and to head towards what has always called me home. But to know what that is, it is time that I leave you to Nala. And so with my deepest gratitude, dear Reader, I hope this story moves you as it moved me.

In hope that we all find our home,

Nilojan

The Goddess' Truth

Prologue

"A moon ago I had a dream,
Where a Goddess beckoned an answer."

And so began my thambi,
Breaking the temple's silence.
As we sat together at her foot,
While the Gods drifted asleep.

We had arrived that dusk to our temple,
As amma's passing marked a year old.
To sway her atman to moksha,
Her sons' prayers to serve as her guide.

Legs folded, in meditation,
Having completed our filial duty,
We bathed that evening, in the temple's warmth,
In the sea that raised us to believe.

For this temple, she was our home,
Coddled, we had, to her holy song.
Her halls, our primordial stage,
Where our youth had been left to dance.

But this dawn, her usual peace,
Was disrupted by a familiar concern.

As a dismay had spoiled over thambi,
One I had long awaited to hear.

“I mean not to interrupt, anna,
But I do not know where else to turn.
Three dreams, I have heard Her voice,
Each time, She asks the same.”

“What is my temple, She beckons,
But no answer of mine is correct.
I seek your guidance, anna,
For I do not wish to fail Her again.”

My eyes shut, unwavering,
Sealed to the altar ahead,
Smiled at my thambi’s query,
Realizing his time had come at last.

“O thambi, what the Goddess asks,
It is a game I have played before.
A game that settles no victors.
A game that still calls me home.”

“Then anna, tell me you must,
What is my temple? What is my answer?
For this riddle troubles my soul,
Share with me the Goddess’ truth.”

“Your answer is for you to find,

But guide you, I will, towards its path.
Close your eyes, thambi, and listen,
As I recite to you the story of Nala."

Our Temple is Our Stories

Book I

Our Temple is Our Stories

Book I

To the Hindu, *moksha* is the ultimate desire of each lifetime: to be liberated from rebirth as the soul returns to the Supreme. It is within this path to ascension that the Hindu temple lies, rooted within limbo between the temporal and the eternal.[1] This positioning of God's dwelling is a calculated product of its sacred plan, as its deliberate form is intended to open a channel to the divine. But this architecture not only allows one to prematurely feel release, but also acts as a literal map towards its attainment. At its essence, the temple is then a ford between two realms, where its design emanates the Supreme's aura while also whispering how man can return.[2] But these whispers are not revealed in the form of direct instructions, but are instead shared as stories to be deciphered from its walls.

The sharing of stories is the foundation of every major religion, understood as an integral pillar to both the growth of their communities and their preservation. Hinduism, no different, has a rich history intertwined with storytelling, where stories were and continue to be the primary mode

1 George Mitchell, *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to its Meaning and Forms* (London: B. I. Publications, 1977), 49.

2 Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple: Vol. I* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976), 6.

its followers embrace.[3] These stories, largely categorized as *smriti,* are what proliferate the lives of the ordinary Hindu, relaying the truth of their authoritative canon under the guise of adventures and prose. *Smriti* encompass a vast collection of myths and parables, but tend to be further sub-divided into the *Puranas* and the *itihasas*. The former captures hundreds of contained legends of Gods and kings, while the latter is composed of the historical epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.[4] But together they are the stories that are taught to Hindus young and old – tales embedded with the spiritual truths every Hindu learns to live by.

These truths were said to be revealed as sacred syllables to ancient *rishis*, as these origins anointed oral transmission as the preferred medium for all Hindus.[5] The Ramayana embodies this reliance, as within its story the author Himself is a character who is orating the epic to His disciples.[6] But with time these stories began to transcend this sole medium, as these narratives would be translated into the architectural narrative of the Hindu temple. The immovable nature of this structure ensured these stories were not lost to time, outliving the very *gurus* and *shastras* that planted them to its walls. These stories then have become archived into the temple's being, patiently waiting to be uncovered by the generations to come. Ultimately, the Hindu temple, while intrinsically is a divine abode where man can visit, has also

3 R. K. Narayan, *Gods, Demons, and Others* (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), xi.

4 Grant Hardy, "What Is Remembered – Epics (Web Lecture)," Sacred Texts of the World. 2014.

5 Grant Hardy, "Hinduism and the Vedas (Web Lecture)," Sacred Texts of the World. 2014.

6 Ramesh Menon, *The Ramayana* (New York: North Point Press, 2001), 8.

inherited the role of a teller and keeper of stories.

But the temple is not only limited to the stories of the Hindu, as its walls also capture the caste, racial, and ethnic identities of its worshippers. All architecture inherently absorbs the histories of its communities, and the temple is no different with its various fields of spiritual attraction. George Mitchell states the Hindu temple intends to connect the world of man with the divine, but it is also "[the reflection] of the ideals and way of life of those who built it."[7] The temple can tell stories of Rama and His path to righteousness, but in the same breath, it can also relay the societal conflicts that plague its patrons. The temple thus is a reservoir of the stories of God but also of man – a space for stories to be deposited, archived, and later to be uncovered.

But what happens when these ancestral temples are left behind to start anew? Do the temples erected abroad carry with them these abandoned stories? If so, what stories do they bring? What stories do they leave behind? What stories are introduced to its being while confronting their new home? It is these questions that lead to the story that lies ahead, but to begin that story one must first be introduced to the Eelam Tamil-Canadian diaspora.

The Eelam Tamil diaspora was primarily established over the course of three decades, scattering across the world from Sri Lanka following the 1983 events of Black July. An anti-Tamil pogrom that targeted the Tamil-minority in Sri Lanka, it is today regarded as the beginning of the island's Civil War, and for fueling the mass exodus to come. A great majority would arrive in Canada between the 1990s and the early-2000s, where the community would become defined

7 Mitchell, *The Hindu Temple*, 14

by their notorious transnational networks.[8] But today, 15 years removed from the bloody end of their war, the Canadian diaspora thrives, and so too does their religious institutions.

One must however note that the diaspora does not all identify as Hindu, as there exists a vibrant Christian and Muslim-Eelam Tamil community. However, for the purpose of this work, the primary focus will be towards the majority-Hindu subset, but the relationship explored between patrons and their temples can naturally be extended to the remainder of the community and their places of worship.

The proposal of a Canadian-Hindu temple immediately posed concerns, as the space and finances required for such a feat was not readily accessible to refugees. But the importance of faith to those that had reluctantly left their homeland ultimately persuaded the Hindu temple to compromise in order to exist. And so, these sacred spaces were primarily nestled into forgotten coves as a generation was raised to view strip malls and industrial corridors as unquestionable homes for the holy.

This phenomena is not unique to the Hindu community, as instances of sacred spaces occupying similar reductive spaces can be identified in various marginalized and minority, religious communities. The work of Dr. Tammy Gaber, for instance, provides documented examples of mosques having to compromise in Canada, while the work of Joanne Punzo Waghorne investigates Hindu temples in London retrofitted to commercial buildings and churches.[9]

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8 Amarnath Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Social Movement and the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Canada* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 71-72.

9 Tammy Gaber. *Beyond the Divide: A Century of Canadian Mosque Design.* (Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022); Joanne Punzo Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2004). 196-224.

Similarly, the academic work of Gillian McCann and Radika Sekar have analyzed how the temple has re-crafted its ancient architecture, as a vast spectrum of literature exists documenting this condition of adaption, and how and why it persists.[10]

These temples do not carry forward their fine details of antiquity, as they are instead re-sculpted to capture the key functions its community requires. This sacrifice was justified by labeling these temples as placeholders, intended to be abandoned once the purpose-built temple became a feasible possibility.

However, the Eelam-Tamil community has for the past decade seen a variety of purpose-built temples erected, but the transitionary temple still thrives as a dominant typology not to be let go. These temples are today considered existing in their permanent state, as a generation of Eelam Tamils have been raised to believe its walls as their definitive temple.

But despite this change in trajectory, there remains within these temples evidence of further desire, as at the entrance of many transitionary temples tends to stand an architectural model. Included at the foot of their ancient plans, these models were originally introduced to showcase the purpose-built temples to come. But these models tended to portray temples of antiquity instead, alluding to a design that could not feasibly exist. Thus, these models did not lead its viewer to the future as originally intended, instead creating a visual path that led its people to their past.

It is this artifact that this piece will use to pin the story ahead,

10 Gillian McCann. "A Case Study of Five Hindu Temples in Southern Ontario." (TSpace, 1995); Radhika Sekar. "Global Reconstruction of Hinduism: A Case Study of Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada," (Uo Research, 2001).

but through the lens of the second-generation that grew amidst its presence. This generation has held an unusual attraction to its temple walls, and the "heavily intertwined" nature of their ethnicity and religion is likely to explain.[11] This leads one to wonder, as to understand the temple as a teller and keeper of stories, what stories lie buried within the model for its children?

11 Amarnath Amarasingam, "Religion and Ethnicity among Sri Lankan Tamil in Ontario," (Canadian Ethnic Studies 40, no. 2, 2008), 154.

We tell ourselves stories in order to live...

We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.

JOAN DIDION
THE WHITE ALBUM



Fig. 9. Book I Frontispiece: *Our Temple is Our Stories*

At the Peacock's Mercy

Chapter I

A familiar warmth had settled within the asokavana.

A stream of light had pierced,
Through the canopy above,
Resting atop the chest,
Of a youth lost to dream.

His dark, tender skin,
No worn than two decades,
Glowed upon its touch,
Soaking beneath its fortune.

But this light had ambitions,
Imprinted by another.
To disrupt, not to comfort,
As it began to set adrift.

Brushing the valley that formed his neck,
To the hills that pursed his breath,
It was only when it grazed his temple,
That Nala's eyes chose to flutter.

And at this, the stream stopped,
Its purpose now fulfilled,
Retracting to its master,

That lied amidst the clouds.

As the grove returned to dark,
Shards of light were left to scatter.
For the youth awoke alone,
To the mercy of the unfamiliar.

Panic filled Nala,
As he inhaled his first breath,
Only to heighten as his eyes,
Bore witness to where he woke.

For dressed in a frayed vetti,
Nala lied limp against an asoka,
As no memory took ahold,
Of why a grove cradled him in its arms.

The youth could feel a weakness,
Weighing within his heart,
Immobilizing his body,
His eyes coerced to wander alone.

And so as he searched the grove,
For answers its sower refused to grant,
A single petal would fall,
Saving his faith from wilting further.

Nala watched as the asoka's fruit,
Danced before his eyes,

As it caressed the air it graced,
Unaware of the ground below.

For a glory of soft ripples,
Would emanate from this kiss.
Revealing a majestic river,
Trembling before his feet.

A deep, saintly green,
She sculpted the grove's edge.
Her beauty surpassing that,
Of the world her reflection swallowed.

For if it were not for that single petal,
Interrupting her water's calm,
Nala would have never deciphered,
The false paradise at his feet.

The youth watched in awe,
As a blossom broke from above him,
Its bulbous form crumbling,
And showering again the river below.

And as the ripples of this fall,
Meandered towards his feet,
Nala broke his trance,
To meet her halfway.

The youth cried in relief,

As his toes met her waters.
Her coolness, a surge,
Awaking him from his grief.

But before Nala's lips,
Could drink too from this sensation,
He was interrupted by a Goddess,
Whose voice sedated him once more.

"My child... It has been long."

Nala's eyes traced the river's edge,
But not a soul was in sight,
For this voice of great poise,
Claimed no great form.

And it was at this that Nala rose,
His immobility having vanquished,
For the youth's heart had been awakened,
Led by a yearning for the unknown.

Looking east, the river swam,
Into the mouth of a vast forest,
Its skies shrouded by plumes,
Where cries of beasts dwelled within.

Looking west, the river plunged,
Into a lush valley in bloom,
Where a mountain loomed its shadow,

Crowning immortal its horizon.

Nala did not know,
Where it was his heart lied,
But before his mind could waver,
The distant peaks announced his fate.

"Come to me, my child.
I know what it is you seek.
Come to me and what you seek,
I promise it shall be yours."

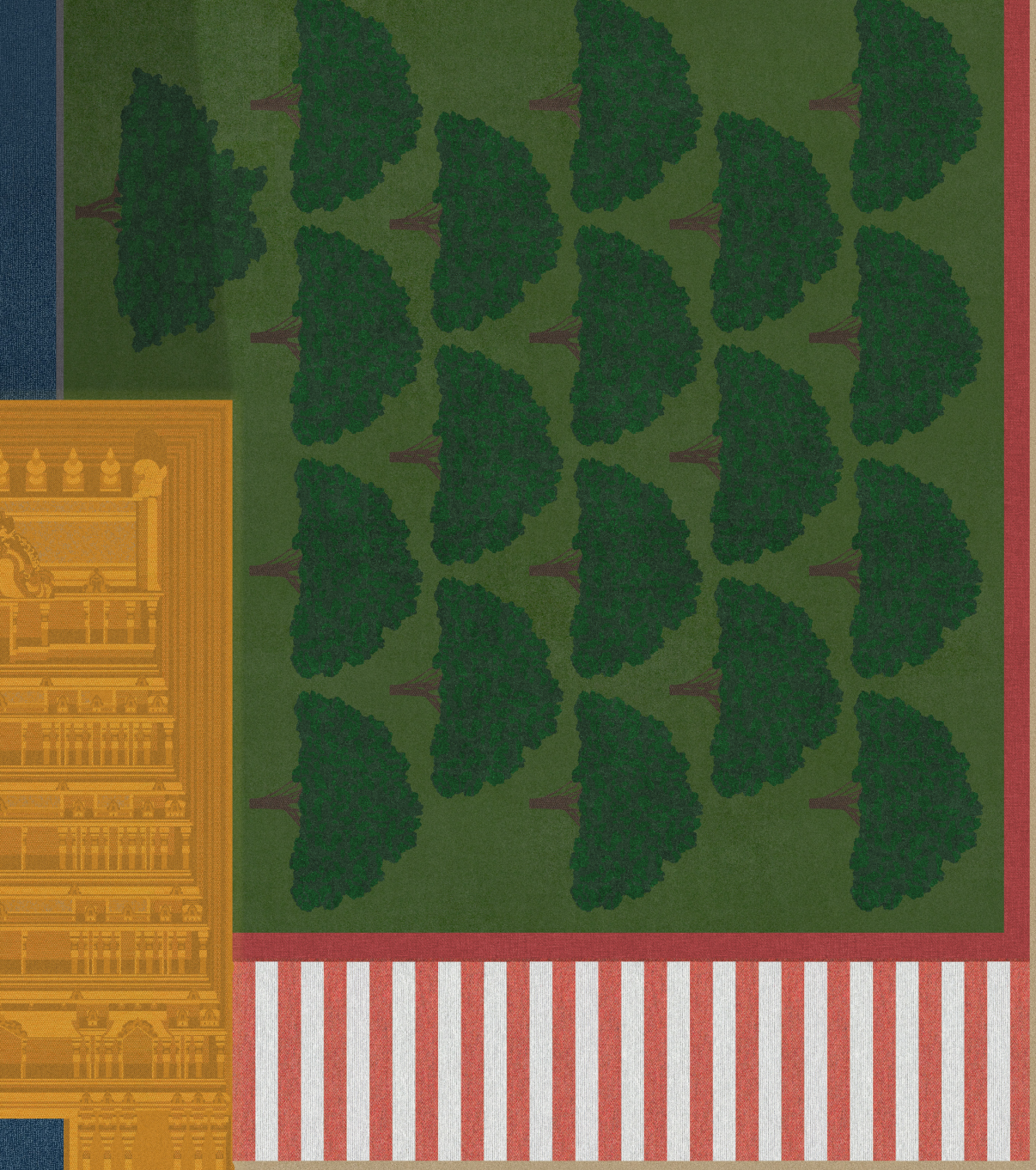
Mesmerized by the Goddess,
And Her offer of the world,
Nala obliged hastily,
Descending to Her voice.

But, you see, as the youth marched,
Her silhouette began to tremble,
And with each step that he took,
The more Her image began to change.

Meanwhile at Her foot,
A pair of gates had begun to form,
Sealed below the mountain,
The river ceasing at its edge.

And it was at Nala noting this entry,
That the peaks left his sight,





As the mountain took this moment,
To adopt its true form.

For when the youth's eyes returned,
A stepped tower returned his stare.
Its finial connecting this world,
To the realm of the divine.

Nala stood in awe,
At this celestial transformation,
But total numbness would take ahold,
When the tower's grey turned to gold.

"A gopuram...," Nala whimpered,
As his body began to tremble,
The tower that marked the entrance,
To the temples of the Gods.

And it was then, as if his memories,
Had been restored to him by Swarga,
That Nala remembered his home,
And the moments before he had lost it.

Nala sprinted towards the tower,
For if what he remembered was true,
The gopuram was his sign,
That answers resided at its gates.

Nala raced down the valley,

Towards the golden structure,
But would become startled by the river,
That had awakened to match his pace.

The river leapt, foaming before him,
But Nala's worries were to where,
As she raced towards the east,
Opposing the youth's stride.

Nala looked to the distant horizon,
Hoping her course meant to distract,
But was instead met with another,
Crippling surprise.

For the gopuram, that moments ago,
Had flashed its smile before him,
Had begun to revert to the very grey,
That had promised him his boon.

The youth ran with all his strength,
But his stride was no match.
For the river soon returned to calm,
And the gold returned to grey.

As Nala fell to his knees,
Her peaks glaring from her throne,
His fists gripping the earth,
His head bowing in defeat.

But before the youth could curse,
The Goddess for Her temptation,
Nala heard a faint rustle,
Project from the opposing shore.

All was quiet for a moment,
And it was then that she emerged,
A patron for the misplaced,
For a peacock had arrived.

Strolling towards the river,
The peacock began to drink.
Her feathers lowered, but her many eyes,
Still glistening in her reflection.

Nala, meanwhile, still flustered,
By the Goddess and her tricks,
Was adamant to cross the river,
To meet his unlikely guide.

With the river up to his waist,
Nala trudged towards the fowl,
Refusing to let another sign,
Once again escape his reach.

And it was the waves of this delusion,
That would acquire her attention,
As the peacock raised her head,
Returning his stare with a coo.

Nala, refusing to be shaken,
By the ceremony of this call,
Was certain if his eyes swayed,
He would lose his only hope.

And it was this fear, that would conceal,
The winding journey yet to come,
For if his eyes had swayed slightly,
He would have seen the gates begin to creak.

Nala wished for nothing more,
Than to return to his home.
To return to the land,
Where the youth knew that he belonged.

But before he could tell this desire,
To the creature of a thousand eyes,
Nala was swallowed whole,
Carried east by the river's fury.

Meanwhile, in the forest,
A broken woman began her prayers.
Unaware that the Goddess,
Would soon deliver a friend.

A Door Left Open

Chapter II

Still feeling the river,
Coursing through his lungs,
Nala gasped for air,
But felt her strength no longer against him.

Emboldened by her absence,
His palms searched frantically for an answer,
Only to then stumble upon,
A comforting discovery.

“Home,” he muttered joyously,
Smiling beneath his breath,

For Nala, feeling around him,
Found he rested atop a hammock,
Its comfort so familiar,
If true, meant that he had escaped.

Nala grinned, convinced,
That he had been liberated from her arms,
But also the cruel nightmare,
That had served as her dominion.

The youth opened his eyes ready,
To be released from his prison,

But what he found instead,
Made him forget any such thought.

For the sky above him had been smothered,
By a hungry grey smoke,
Swallowing the heads of every tree,
That dared to ever pierce it.

And the headless encircled Nala,
Their trunks becoming bars,
Spanning from this world to the clouds,
That had been conjured to contain it.

The only hint of an exit,
Was a narrow opening winding south,
But Nala winced, hearing waves,
Crash from its direction.

The youth punched his hammock,
His longing spoiled by anger,
And it was then that Nala,
Was dealt his final, decisive blow.

For the youth found his hammock,
That moments ago he claimed his own,
Was a charpai as foreign,
As the world that had claimed him.

Clenching its wooden frame,

He weaved his fingers between its rope,
His fists tightening as each arm,
Clamoured in hopes to strangle.

And it was then that Nala glanced,
At the fury that fed his veins,
For he, a victim to Her world,
Was now losing again to his fury.

Eyeing the narrow path,
The river surely returning his stare,
The youth realized that this fight,
Was not one destined to continue.

That while he did not know,
Why the Goddess had detained him,
Her grace was to be trusted,
Just as he had learned in his youth.

Her world was his warden,
But also his one guide,
And so loosening his grip,
He looked to Her in reverence.

And as if She had heard,
The youth's silent allegiance,
The river's crashes became mute,
Returning to a calm.

Nala tried to stand,
To pay his respects to the river,
But found his fingers caught,
Between the charpai's weaves.

And it was while pulling his frail joints,
From the knots that curled its wood,
That the youth became struck,
By the wear the rope revealed.

It then dawned on Nala,
The reason for its age,
That this charpai must belong,
To someone of this world.

That he had been saved.
Left to rest by a being.
And this charpai was his message,
That he was not alone.

And so Nala searched all around,
For any trace of this guide,
Venturing as far,
As his worn body would allow.

But it was only when he sat back,
On the charpai where he awoke,
That he found hidden behind him,
An ashram in disguise.

A humble abode made of earth,
And the trees raised within it,
The ashram hid without effort,
A child of Bhudevi Herself.

Its disguise was only broken,
By the will of Nala's fate,
Only unveiled to his seeking eyes,
By a door left open.

Leaning his head towards the entry,
With his eyes ready to peer,
Nala froze when he heard,
The sound of footsteps approach.

The youth retracted his head,
His once excitement subdued by fear,
Of what kind of being,
He was soon bound to meet.

But before Nala's mind,
Could convince his legs to run,
A woman, no older than him,
Walked through its opening.

She smiled at Nala,
And Nala smiled back.

While Nala could not recognize,

The woman at first glance,
He could not help but feel shaken,
At why he felt drawn to her smile.

Her skin was as dark,
If not darker, than his,
And her hair, thick and braided,
Was pinned as a spiral.

The woman stood over him,
Bearing a white sari, tattered and stained,
Her body bare of luxury,
Beyond a pearl pendant below her neck.

But her eyes were what drew,
Nala further to his host.
Worn and heavy, as if beneath,
Was a world he could never know.

The woman walked to the charpai,
And sat by Nala's waist.
Holding a silver platter in one hand,
Her other scooping from the plate.

Juggling what she had cupped,
She continued to toss into a sphere,
Looking then to the youth,
Extending her hand in offering.

A ball of rice.

Nala's worn body,
Suddenly reminded of his hunger,
Bit into the offering,
Without a moment's hesitation.

"Welcome, thambi, to my ashram,
I am Devi, what a blessing.
I found you washed ashore,
And took it my sign to take you in."

"That river, she is reckless,
There is never telling what she thinks.
For at times she is calm,
But can in an instant begin to feed."

"But I see you are an exception,
She has a plan for you it seems.
Stranding you in my care,
I am grateful to see you awake."

Nala smiled, sitting upright,
As Devi continued to serve.

"Tell me thambi, are you Tamil?"
To which the youth paused.
"How did you know?" he stuttered,
As Nala swallowed his last bite.

“A feeling,” she said smugly.
“I suppose you know when you are yourself.
You know when you have stumbled,
Upon someone who shares your world.”

“It seems fate has brought us together, …”
“Nala,” he filled in.
“It is my pleasure then, Nala,
To have you as my guest.”

“But I must admit, this is the first,
That I have welcomed a stranger.
Stay as long as you wish,
But where from do you hail?”

The youth looked to the path ahead,
And how it wound to the holy river,
Remembering all that had happened,
Before he had awoke.

The peacock, the gopuram,
The restored memories upon its sight.
“It is quite the story, Devi.
Let me start from the very beginning.”

Your Temple, My Child

Chapter III

"A moon ago, I had a dream.
I thought it first, another dawn.
The sun was rising behind me,
As I stood before my temple."

"But before I begin that tale,
I must first tell you, Devi, another.
That my temple and its walls,
Only its patrons would believe."

"For my temple does not claim,
A gopuram as its crown,
Nor is the land it rests,
As holy as its protectors."

"My temple instead dwells,
Within the walls of a steel unit.
Inhabiting one of hundreds,
Of enclosures built for machines."

"It dwells next to craftsmen,
Repairing vehicles, immense.
Next to merchants that sell goods,
At sublime volumes and scales."

“Even the doors of my temple,
Do not swing as they should.
Instead ascend does its metal gates,
To welcome its daily guests.”

“But what lies within this temple,
Is what truly amazes, Devi.
For as you walk through its disguise,
The aroma of sandalwood promptly follows.”

“A kaleidoscope of patterns,
Would hug onto your sight.
As a glance would leave you begging,
To embrace its marked walls.”

“And sharing in this greeting,
Would be the drone of a veena.
Your heart steadying to match its strums.
Your body at the mercy of its chords.”

“It would be then that you look ahead,
To the holy sanctum, the garbhagriha.
Your palms pleading for its steps,
To feel a trace of the warmth within.”

“And as these sensations compound,
The priests would gather at the sanctum.
Their stance a slated signal,
To the musicians that it was time.”

“And when the mridangams and nadaswarams,
Drown out the veena’s peace,
The priests will chant their mantras,
And reveal to you God’s glory.”

“And that is when you would be,
The most amazed by this temple.
That despite its unholy appearance,
It was no different from any other.”

“But when I stepped into my temple,
In that dream a moon ago,
There was nothing of that sort,
For this temple was unfamiliar.”

“There were no smells, no colours,
Not a sound, no altar to greet.
For that strange morning, my temple,
Was gripped by only darkness.”

“For even the rising sun,
Could not penetrate where I stood.
But as I stepped further, into its abyss,
I heard a voice. One from your world.”

“My child, in ten days,
You must visit these halls again.
Complete a pradakshina around your temple,
And a boon will be given on my behalf.”

“Elated, I agreed,
And in ten days time, I visited again.
Completing my pradakshina,
Around every altar, to be certain.”

“But that night, I was visited,
Again by the Goddess.
Her voice, but an echo,
Of the terms She spoke before.”

“Complete a pradakshina.
Around your temple, my child.”

“And so, after another ten days,
I returned again to the temple.
But this time, having realized,
The error of my past attempt.”

“I walked past its doors,
Circling, instead, its exterior,
Around its brick walls,
And the units that it neighboured.”

“But yet again, that night,
The Goddess visited, displeased.
Reciting once more,
The very same instructions.”

“Your temple, my child.”

“When thirty days had passed,
Since I first heard Her voice,
I sat flustered, in worry,
At my temple’s foot.”

“What is my temple?
I had no answers left to give.
But it seemed She was certain,
That a truth pinned these walls.”

“And it was as my eyes began to drift,
That trailing the ceiling, I found pipes.
Each painted vibrant, flamboyant,
To match the mandalas they interrupted.”

“Struck, I was, by the oblations,
That once flowed through these cavities.
Of the milk blessed by murtis,
That ascended, unnoticed, through this maze.”

“Sprawling across the temple,
Hugging walls, floors, and ceilings,
A holy network hid in sight,
Revealed only to those that looked.”

“It was while tracing these paths,
That a pipe led to a plinth.
Covered in dust, a few strides away,
From the entrance doors.”

“Excluded from the sacred plan,
But within the temple’s walls.
I walked to the plinth, only to find,
An object upon its helm.”

“Clearing the dust with my palm,
The object began to reveal,
As I could feel the eyes of Devaloka,
Each soul holding their breath.”

“Brushing off the last morsel of dust,
I uncovered an artifact sealed from the world.
For on that plinth, sat an object forgotten.
A miniature of a holy temple.”

“Encased in glass, no larger than myself,
Was a fragile miniature, constructed of wood.
Marveled I was at its handcrafted details,
Reveling in its strokes of undisturbed paint.”

“Imitating ancient temples,
And abiding by sacred laws,
Its bygone image was a privilege to see,
One as a child, I was not afforded.”

“For this temple shared no walls.
Its land belonged only to it.
Its helm devoid of rolling doors,
Or a roof to hide beneath.”

“And so peering over its walls,
Into its open courtyard,
It was as if I looked into the eyes,
Of the temples of my ancestors.”

“A golden gopuram towered,
Over its striped walls,
And beneath its shadow, a pair of gates,
Sealed the eternal from the temporal.”

“And at the shadow’s tip,
Radiated the sanctum and its holy.
Its glow dubbing the altar,
A temple of its own.”

“For grazing the glass above,
Its vimana reached as if to Kailash,
Creating a holy bridge,
For the divine to descend below.”

“It was while fixating on this path,
For never had I seen it so splendid,
That I was drawn to a slit above,
That would foretell what lied atop its steps.”

“For this miniature was not,
A projection of the past.
It was a model. A promise.
Set to the future.”

“For a flurry of currency,
Had rained over the sanctum,
Each note and coin,
Powdered by decades of dust.”

“Deposits by patrons,
Through the slot above,
The donations revealed,
The intentions of this model.”

“To one day be their fund,
For the temple its image promised.
To one day replace,
The temple it claimed home.”

“My palm now against the glass,
I recalled a distant memory,
Of my amma holding me above this model,
My petite fingers clenching a coin.”

“And as I pressed its metal,
Through this narrow opening,
I recalled watching it spin, then settle,
On the steps where it now lies.”

“This model had been a promise,
Of what was to come.
A reminder that my temple,
Was not truly finished.”

“But was this the truth?
Was this all this model was?
I could not help but feel drawn,
To some grander story.”

“And in this moment of lapse,
My body began to move.
And submitting to its demands,
I closed my eyes, pressing my palms in prayer.”

“For I began a pradakshina,
Around this cryptic model,
And as I circled, I felt weightless,
As if the world had become a blur.”

“It was then that I heard,
The veena’s strums begin to fade,
As the nadaswaram and mridangams,
Began to flood the temple’s halls.”

“And then finally came,
The mantras of the priests.
Their words soon turned to echoes,
Until suddenly. Silence.”

“I opened my eyes,
Expecting the Goddess to be before me,
But what I found instead,
Was my last glimpse of my world.”

“For I saw the miniature,
Now monumental in size,
Floating in darkness,
Eyeing me as its prey.”

“And at this my vision,
Was blinded by black.
As the next moment, I found myself,
Awaking in a grove.”

Nala looked to Devi,
Hoping his story was meant for her.
That his woes had an answer.
Both simple and brief.

But instead Devi sat,
In a deep meditation.
To which, Nala pleaded,
For his host to reply.

“This world is not my home,
O please, Devi, you must,
Tell me that you know something,
Any means for my escape.”

At these words Devi's eyes opened,
Her pupils full of concern.
Locking her stare with Nala’s,
As worry consumed the youth.

“Nala, how was it,
That you were swept to this ashram?
A suspicion runs through me,
That compels me to ask.”

And as Nala explained,
The trials of the Goddess,
Devi’s face began to sink,
Into unease, then despair.

“It was not until I saw the gopuram,
That I remembered how I arrived in this world.
I beg of you, Devi,
Point me towards my home.”

But as Nala looked up,
Devi bowed her head,
Her eyes unwilling,
To meet the youth’s frown.

“Nala, I apologize,
I may live in this world,
But I too do not call this land,
A home to which I belong.”

“For I remember very little,
Of the home that had raised me,
But those fragments are proof enough,
That I am not the one that you seek.”

“But what makes certain that I,
Cannot be the guide to your quest,
Are the events that have swept you,
To my ashram's shores.”

“For you see when I arrived,
I too was fooled by a mountain.
I too swam towards a peacock.
I too was swept by this river.”

"I apologize, Nala,
But I believe that I,
Am no less of a victim,
Than you to this world.”

Holding onto Devi’s hand,
Nala spoke with what hope remained,
Certain that his journey,
Had not met its end,

“Devi, you say, that we are both Tamil,
And my arrival followed, the same path as yours.
Then I am certain, the Goddess has a plan for us both.
We were brought together. We shall leave as one.”

“But first tell me, why it is,
That you still remain at this ashram?
Have you not been beyond these shores?
Why not try to escape?”

Devi felt the alarm,
That propelled Nala's voice,
As she knew not to lie,
Replying without reservation.

"I have tried to, my dear Nala,
But whatever I do and wherever I go,
I always find myself back,
Bound to this ashram's hold."

"For I have travelled south, across the river,
Just as we both did for that fowl,
Hoping that I could find a path,
That could lead me back home."

"But when I stepped onto that shore
Certain that I had escaped,
I found instead the ashram,
Sitting, awaiting in the distance."

"I have even travelled west,
Towards that deceiving mountain,
Hoping to find again,
That very asokavana."

"But instead as I approached,
What I thought was that holy tree,
I was disappointed again,
To find the ashram in its place."

“I have even travelled north,
Deep into the forest that strangles us,
Hoping that a savior,
Slept amongst the trees.”

“But as I pushed through its barbed branches,
Parted its unkempt bushes,
I would be left to confront,
That I had circled back to the ashram.”

“Even east I have travelled, Nala,
Along the shores of this very river,
In hopes that traversing deeper,
Would lead me back home.”

“But a suffocating mist,
Would always obstruct my vision,
And before long, my eyes stood again,
In front of this very door.”

“I have tried everything to leave, Nala,
But this ashram is now my world.
That is why decades ago, I folded,
And accepted my fate.”

“For I fear that you,
Must now reckon with this reality.
That this world has no mercy,
Nor any plans to let you go.”

Show Me How to Live

Chapter IV

At learning that Devi,
Was tied to the ashram,
Nala denied their shared fate,
Deciding instead to test her words.

Swimming to the opposing shore.
Running towards the mountain.
Hiking through the forest.
Trekking deeper into the mist.

But just as Devi had explained,
No matter where he traversed,
The ashram remained his end,
A constant, ready to ambush.

It was after accepting this truth,
That for nine days Nala wallowed,
Vowing to rest on Devi's charpai,
Until the Goddess answered.

As the youth would spend his days,
Watching Devi resume her life,
As his host would care for Nala,
As he rejected their exile's terms.

For nine days, Nala watched,
As Devi awoke at dawn.
As she set course for the river,
Completing her prayers, returning midday.

She would then dine with the youth,
Before retreating once more for the river.
Meditating for the remainder of the day,
Only leaving her shores at dusk.

Each night before Devi left,
She would pray a renewed Nala would greet her.
But for eight straight nights, all she found,
Was a youth that had strayed further from the truth.

On the dawn of the ninth day,
Devi, sensing that Nala needed to be drawn away,
Asked the youth if he would like to join her,
In performing her morning prayer.

Nala, hardly paying attention,
Shook his head in disagreement,
Resuming his stare with the forest,
As if his answer would soon arrive.

Devi sighed,
“Nala, let me help you.
Come with me, I can show you,
How to live in this world.”

But Nala refused,
To look even her way,
As Devi shook her head,
And began to stroll towards the river.

And it was as she began this stroll,
That a gust swept into Nala's ears,
Carrying the sounds of crashing waves,
That had seemingly just returned.

Nala, shuddered upon hearing these dunes,
Reminded of the allegiance that he once made.
That he had sworn to trust this world's guidance,
Taking a deep breath, as he looked around him.

Though a prisoner of this earth,
Nala had chosen to be alone with this ashram,
And yet the river, through her gusts,
Continued to plead, this was not his end.

This world was not done with Nala,
And at this, a spark possessed the youth.
As after nine days, Nala stood,
Walking towards the path that meandered south.

Sitting over the embankment's clusters,
Devi's eyes focused on the coursing river,
And about to enter her meditation,
She heard a faint rustle from behind her.

Devi turning around,
Found Nala arriving from the forest.
Thanking the river for ending his misery,
Expecting the youth to come to her side.

But instead, the awoken youth,
Whose eyes were fixated on the river,
Continued to walk past Devi,
His mind beneath a trance.

Walking past the embankment,
Past the shore, and into the river,
Until the youth was one with her water,
Submerged by her wrath.

Devi sat horrified,
Ready to pounce, to rescue.
But froze when she began to notice,
The river's waters begin to calm.

A miracle began to unfold,
The river turning as still as glass,
As Nala rose from its reflection,
Just as a sun rises from night.

The youth trudged towards Devi,
Sitting down on a stone next to her,
Before opening his wet palm,
To hold her hand in his.

“Thank you Devi,
For all that you have done.
For your truth, your kindness,
And your unrelenting strength.”

“All I ask of you now,
Is that you stay true to your word.
Show me, Devi, as you said.
Show me how to live.”

From then on, Nala and Devi,
Spent their every moment together.
Devi teaching Nala,
All she knew of their world.

And Nala continued to share,
The truth of his model,
Forgetting not a word,
At Devi’s constant insistence.

It was not long before,
Three moons had passed,
As Nala grew fond of the world,
From Devi’s teachings and her warmth.

For the youth was no longer tormented,
By the realm of his exile,
Or at the thought of never returning,
To the world he had left.

But neither did Nala,
Forget his past life,
As each night before he left the river,
He would ask the Goddess to send a guide.

A Wandering Lotus

Chapter V

It was the dawn of the sixth moon,
When Nala, meditating alongside Devi,
Noticed an elegant object,
Drifting towards them in the river.

Nala nudged Devi,
Breaking her trance so she too could observe,
The rare visitor that had arrived,
Unannounced with a message.

The two watched in awe,
As a single lotus brushed their shores.
Floating east as it swam deeper,
Into the grasps of the forest.

Quick to be disinterested,
By the encounter he had noted,
Nala, after Devi's acknowledgment,
Began to resume his meditation.

But as he began to prepare,
He found Devi still staring at the flower.
Now only a speck,
Ready to be consumed by the river's mist.

Nala wondered why,
A smile spread so evenly across her cheeks.
What it was about this lotus,
That had invited such excitement.

For Nala's eyes tended to linger,
At Devi in these mundane moments,
Admiring how her joy glowed,
How it formed the creases of her smile.

But above all, what drew Nala,
Was the resounding weight he still felt.
As when he looked into Devi's eyes,
He could not help but sink.

As no matter Devi's joy.
No matter how pervasive.
When his eyes locked with hers,
He felt the sadness that upheld her strength.

Nala had always wondered,
For how long Devi had been alone.
For how long was it just her and this ashram?
When did her exile begin?

Though she looked no older than him,
Nala knew this was all a farce.
That the way that Devi cared for him,
Surely decades stood between them both.

Nala was always,
The one to be taken care of,
But he had always wondered,
If Devi ever needed his warmth.

Did she yearn for her home?
Did she revel in what she left?
Did she ever fixate,
On the fragments that she remembered?

Nala had many questions,
But never the courage to ask,
But was also aware of how little,
He himself had shared.

For the youth had made certain,
To only speak of the temple and its miniature.
As an irrational uncertainty,
Prevented him from sharing any more.

Nala looked at Devi,
Once more at his side,
Her eyes still mesmerized by the lotus,
That had now all but disappeared.

It was then that an ounce of courage,
Surfaced on Nala's tongue,
Telling him that it was time,
To learn his friend’s story.

Nala took a breath,
Placing his hand on her shoulder.
“Why is it Devi that you still stare at the lotus?
A lotus that is no longer there?”

Devi began to laugh.
“Many reasons, my dear, Nala.
For when I saw that blossom float past,
I felt as if I had seen it a million times before.”

“And yet I am certain,
That this world has never blessed,
My eyes with a lotus,
Until this very moment.”

“Do you think then, Devi,
That those encounters did not occur in this world?
That what you recall are not false memories,
But memories from your home?”

“I do not know, Nala,
But I wish that I could tell you.
That I could dig deep into myself,
And rekindle all my memories of home.”

“But instead all that I own,
Is a single fragment of my past.
That bears the unfortunate burden,
Of keeping my hope alive.”

Devi sighed, standing up,
Against the embankment's edge,
Crossing her arms, as she gazed,
Into the river's waters.

“I have sat on this embankment,
For what I am sure is now decades,
Each day hoping for something,
Of my home to drift to me again.”

”But everything that washes,
Down this river tells me nothing,
But the feeling of perhaps,
Once having seen it before.”

Nala sat stunned,
At what he had just heard.
“Devi, what do you mean by again?
What has the river given you?”

Nala stood up surprised.
It had not occurred to him until then,
That this world spoke to Devi,
Just as it did to him.

“It was long ago, Nala,
When I first arrived at these shores.
Long before I built the ashram,
Where we now live.”

“I had just been swept to these shores,
And while recovering on this rock,
My tear-struck eyes were caught,
By an object drifting atop the waves.”

“This was no lotus,
In fact, the closer that I looked,
The more that I was certain,
It was just a garland of flowers.”

“It was then that the voice,
Of the Goddess called to me,
Just as you say,
It one day called for you.”

“What lies in the river is yours, Devi.
Take it from my waters. It shall guide you home.”

“And so I ran into the river,
Sweeping the waves that held the object.
Until finally I pulled the garland,
Into my willing arms.”

“But as I held it between my fingers,
I realized I had been mistaken,
For what I held was a necklace,
That felt strikingly familiar.”

“A black chord with a pendant.

A pearl as its jewel.
It is the very necklace,
That I wear before you now."

"And when I gazed into the pearl,
Seeing my withered face in its reflection,
At that moment, a single memory,
Came rushing back to me."

"It was then that I remembered,
That this necklace belonged,
To someone that I had,
All but forgotten."

"Someone who I had,
And still dearly love.
For this necklace belonged to my blood,
It belonged to my thambi."

"When I held this necklace that day,
I could not remember all that I hoped.
And as I hold it even today,
Nothing more returns."

"Only a single memory,
Pervades my empty mind.
And this memory of home,
I have fed on for decades."

“I remembered sitting,
At a worn, wooden table,
Reading in a room that with a glance,
I knew its whole arrangement.”

“My thambi, a decade old,
Read in front of me,
While a humid breeze wisped,
From the window behind him.”

“Around the table were rows of shelves,
Full of books of all sizes.
Each spine whispering stories,
Each whispering something familiar.”

“I remember putting down my book,
Where a Prince cracked a bow,
To watch my thambi read.
To revel in the peace of that moment.”

“But as I put my book down,
I found that he too had done the same,
Only he to fiddle,
With this very necklace.”

“In that memory, I had never seen,
This necklace before,
And so I asked from whom,
Did he receive such jewelry.”

“He hesitated at first,
But told me he had found the necklace,
A souvenir, he said,
From his stroll to this very room.”

“He assured me not to worry,
That he planned to return it to its place,
That the only reason it remained in his possession,
Is because he became fixated by its shape.”

““Does this pearl not look just like Lanka, akka?”
As his thumb rolled over the pendant.
His eyes full of a curiosity,
That only a child could embrace.”

““It does, thambi,”
I said back to him,
“It looks just like our island.
Just like the jewel that Lanka will always be.””

“He smiled at me,
And I at him,
As the two of us returned,
To the course of our reading.”

“That is all, Nala,
That I remember of my home.
This single conversation,
And the feeling it left me with.”

“The feeling of belonging,
At a table with my thambi,
Puzzling over a pendant,
That too would be exiled.”

“I think of it every morning,
Every night, every dream,
And every moment that I glance,
At what rests at my neck.”

“In fact, I must confess,
When six moons ago, you washed ashore,
I was certain you were my thambi,
That that feeling had returned.”

“That after decades, the river,
Had given me the one person I had sought.
And while, Nala, I am glad to have you next to me,
I sometimes cannot help but wish you were him.”

“Your arrival has however,
Ignited a hope within me,
That I thought I had long lost,
To the monotony of this life.”

“For the river feels alive,
More than any time previous,
And because of this, I now fixate,
On everything that stumbles ashore.”

“For even if it is a wandering lotus,
Maybe my thambi will come next.
And then I can run again into the river,
And scoop him into my arms.”

“I have left him alone for so many years.
So many years that we could have spent together.
I wish to see him once more,
But if I cannot leave, let me be selfish.”

“Please O Goddess,
Please bring him to me.
Bring my thambi to my shores,
I beg of you, bring home to me.”

Devi fell to her knees,
Her face suddenly swept by tears,
As Nala knelt to meet her,
To embrace his fallen friend.

“There will be no need for him to arrive,
For I promise you this, take my word.
We will both find our way home,
And you will find your way into his arms.”

While Devi sobbed into Nala,
The youth fixated on where the lotus had left.
And it was as Nala traced its path,
That his eyes caught a hold of another drift.

Another lotus.
Followed by another, and then another.
As a soothing melody,
Suddenly filled the air.

And Nala, familiar with its strums,
Gasped at what had arrived in this world.
“A veena,” he muttered,
Beginning to hold his breath.

Nala and Devi turned west,
To where the melody seemed to origin,
As they discovered a flurry of lotuses,
Swarming the river from its direction.

But it was what followed these blossoms,
That made Devi leap to her feet,
As Nala, seeing what was soon to wash ashore,
Joined his host in her eager stance.

As behind this floral wave,
A single stream of light poked through the clouds,
Illuminating a patch of her waters,
And what it was that marched within.

For a group of a hundred men and women,
Paraded towards Nala and Devi.
Their knees deep in the river,
Their hearts lost to the veena’s strums.

Nala cried in joy,
Pressing his palms over his head,
Thanking the Goddess for finally,
Answering his only prayer.

March of the Hundred

Chapter VI

Nala and Devi broke,
For the embankment's edge,
Their stride guided by the veena,
That now flooded the ashram.

Nala ran eager,
To settle at the highest peak,
To gaze in awe at the hundred,
That would soon rest on their shores.

Devi ran alongside him,
Eager to embrace these hundred strangers,
To listen to their stories of this world,
And the one they surely left behind.

As their eyes met midstride,
They both acknowledged the eagerness they shared,
To heed the counsel of the hundred in hope,
The Goddess spoke through their words.

For surely, this was their sign,
That home was in the horizon,
That their time at this ashram,
Was coming finally to a close.

The two now stood upon the embankment's peak,
Waiting patiently for fate to arrive,
As Devi, grateful of all that had unfolded,
Turned to Nala in joy.

"It is just as I had told you, Nala.
Ever since you arrived the Goddess speaks clearly.
Look at what she says to us now.
Look at the hundred that roll from her tongue."

"Our home is near, Nala,
I can feel the path unfolding as we speak.
Let us walk to our shore and acquaint ourselves.
May I be rewarded finally for my patience."

Nala smiled at Devi,
But could not shake his suspicion of what was to come,
For the Goddess had only ever spoken in riddles,
And Nala wondered if she would stop now.

As Nala and Devi stepped down to the river's shore,
Their arrival seemed expected.
As the two were greeted by a blanket of lotuses,
Twirling as they engulfed the river and its blue.

The only glimpse of the river of before,
Was a product of the hundred strangers that neared,
As their strides would briefly reveal her waters,
Before nudging the blossoms east.

Nala stood infatuated,
By the bed of blossoms that paved the river,
But Devi, hoping her thambi approached,
Made certain to shake him from his trance.

As the two both looked ahead,
They were joyous to finally see the faces of the hundred,
Though neither was prepared for what they would find,
As a fear spread over their faces.

As trudging through the river,
And parsing through its lotuses,
Was a group of a hundred men and women,
Each with a face eerily similar to their own.

For if it was not for the folds and wrinkles,
That weighed on these hundred strangers,
Nala and Devi would have surely believed,
That the river had conceived their reflections.

Draped in patterned vettis and saris,
The hundred swayed in unison to their stride's rhythm.
Rocking together as if each body belonged,
To the heart of a single being.

The arms of each man and woman,
Stretched to meet the rapturous light.
While their eyes and mouths remained sealed,
As if hiding the secret behind their march.

Nala and Devi searched,
Through the crowd for the veena that echoed,
Only to find the throats of the hundred,
Trembling to its tune.

And it was when Nala and Devi realized,
That they swooned to an orchestra of hums,
That they finally pieced together,
The mystery behind this parade.

For this was a procession,
A procession of a hundred worshippers strong.
As Nala and Devi prayed in that moment,
That it was the Goddess that they all spoke to.

As the worshippers neared,
Devi clenched her pendant in excitement.
While Nala closed his eyes in prayer,
Begging the Goddess to not toy again with their hopes.

Nala and Devi lifted, their arms above their head,
Pressing their palms together, before closing their eyes.
It was then that the two prostrated, before the shore,
Both hoping the hundred, would raise them in blessing.

But just as Nala had suspected,
The Goddess was not done with her games,
As the worshippers marched past their shores,
Refusing to acknowledge their reverence.

Devi, unwilling to accept such neglect,
Raced along the shore.
Wailing her love for her thambi,
To any ear that she met.

She sobbed as she recounted,
Her decades of exile in this world,
As she spoke through the pain of remembering a home,
And not remembering enough.

She uttered to the worshippers,
All that lied in her heart,
Words that would strike sympathy,
To even the cruelest of the world.

But not one of the hundred,
Wavered to her suffering.
Continuing to march through the river,
As if Devi did not exist.

It was then that Devi tried,
To pry her way into the procession,
Trying to force herself into its centre,
To be swallowed by the ignorant march.

But no matter how she tried,
Or how she pressed or what she said,
Nothing could penetrate,
The march of the hundred.

Nala, meanwhile, remained,
Prostrated at the shore,
Waiting patiently for the Goddess,
To reveal her divine intentions.

But as his ears pressed against the ground,
And he heard their trudging begin to fade,
Nala wondered if he had misunderstood,
The answer to her riddle.

And so Nala raised his head briefly,
To see if such a theory had merit,
Only to find the worshippers well past their shore,
And Devi standing alone at its edge.

Devi watched as the backs of the worshippers,
Treaded towards the mist, as had that first lotus.
And without a second thought, Devi dove into the river,
Trudging after her only hope.

Nala seeing her leap,
Rose from his knees.
Racing along the shores,
Calling for Devi to return.

That the Goddess did not will,
Such action from the two.
That she would guide them,
Should they stay patient.

Nala reminded Devi,
Of when they last chased after temptation,
How the Goddess washed them both,
To this very ashram.

He told Devi to be patient.
That all they needed to do was wait.
For the Goddess' voice would surely,
Return to greet them both.

But Devi, set on her ambitions,
Ignored Nala's numerous calls,
Continuing to follow the hundred,
Certain that the Goddess marched within.

And so Nala, desperate to not lose his friend,
Was left with no other choice,
As the youth dove into the river,
Following Devi's path.

As Nala trudged towards Devi,
The worshippers began to step into the eastern mist,
One-by-one disappearing into the unknown,
Each taking with them any trace of the procession.

Devi, now in arms reach,
Of the last of the marching hundred,
Stared into the swallowing mist,
Realizing the futility of what may lie within.

Though Devi's faith may have been ignited,
A part of her still hesitated seeing the mist.
Hesitated knowing that she may find herself,
Back at the ashram should she walk ahead.

It was during this moment of hesitation,
That the final worshippers marched into the mist,
And Devi seeing the last of the hundred vanish,
Became immobilized by her defeat.

Nala, now having caught up with Devi,
Caught her just as she fell limp.
Gazing into the mist,
Trying to decipher the Goddess' message.

And in that moment Nala witnessed,
An opening appear within the haze,
Where in the distance a building burned,
As a youth entered its doors.

Nala knew this was his sign,
That the ashram was finally behind him,
And so he put Devi's arm over his shoulder,
And marched cordially into the mist.

The Hum's Cipher

Chapter VII

When Nala stepped through the opening,
He found the mist had settled above their heads,
While the river had receded to their ankles,
For they had entered an unlikely realm.

No longer a narrow channel,
The river had tripled in size,
Swallowing any trace of land,
Marooning Nala and Devi within her waters.

The only hint of life,
Were the trunks of two hundred, scattered trees,
Their canopies above the mist,
Their roots beneath her waters.

Nala limped with Devi,
To lean against one of these pillars,
And as he rested against its bark,
The hums of the worshippers suddenly returned.

The hums were faint, almost an echo,
But it was enough to break Devi from her daze.
Her eyes fluttering to the familiar melody,
Only to then jump upon realizing the ashram's absence.

But this delight was only momentary,
As she soon found what had taken its place,
And it was then that she realized,
Something that Nala had not.

Devi turned to Nala,
The weight in her eyes more pronounced than ever.
"Where are the worshippers, Nala?
Why are we in this forest alone?"

Nala and Devi wandered the forest,
Weaving through the labyrinth of trees,
Continuing to march eastwards,
In hopes of stumbling upon the hundred.

But no matter where they walked,
There was no sign of the procession,
And the further they wandered,
The further they strayed from where they began.

Soon there was no trace,
Of the opening back to the ashram,
As Nala began to wonder,
If they had traded one exile for another.

Devi, sensing Nala's worry,
Soon felt her own faith begin to dwindle,
And as if the forest too sensed their doubt,
She decided to calm her guests.

The earth beneath their feet began to tremble,
And so too did the river that swallowed their ankles.
It was then that Nala and Devi witnessed,
The true might of the forest.

As like daggers withdrawing from their sheaths,
A hundred trees began to rise above their heads.
Ascending above the mist,
As if plucked by the Devas, their roots exposed.

Nala and Devi watched in disbelief,
As the trees rose before their eyes.
Watching as their silhouettes morphed,
As trunks turned to legs, roots turned to feet.

The forest continued to rumble,
And as a result, so too did the mist.
Parting the clouds momentarily,
Exposing the two to what this forest truly was.

For it was not the canopies of trees,
That rested above the mist.
But the torsos of the hundred worshippers,
That the two thought they had lost.

Nala and Devi ran,
As the hundred began their march,
The two's heads grazing their parading knees,
Being careful to not be trampled.





While the Goddess had slowed their strides,
Likely to give Nala and Devi a chance,
The two were still certain,
That their demise had already been written.

It was only when Devi realized,
That they marched to their own hums,
That a semblance of hope,
Hovered over the two's escape.

As Devi began to slowly learn,
The pattern behind each step,
It did not take long before she was weaving,
Through the legs with algorithmic precision.

But while Devi may have solved,
The riddle behind the strides,
Nala meanwhile could not,
Make sense of their intricate pattern.

Nala did all that he could,
To weave through this sea.
Following Devi's lead.
Even mimicking her steps.

But no matter how he ran,
He always remained a step behind.
And it was this single step that led Nala,
To his ultimate fate.

As while imitating Devi,
And following her motion,
Nala did not see the foot,
That stood firmly in front of him.

Nala tripped over the foot,
And flew into the air,
Flailing his arms, trying to grab,
Onto anything to save his fall.

And that was when he saw,
A single branch reaching from through the mist,
And without a second thought,
Nala grabbed onto it, planting his feet into the river.

It was then that the youth looked above,
And realized what he held was not a branch.
For Nala held the palm of an outstretched hand,
The world around him freezing at its touch.

For the earth no longer trembled,
The river no longer gurgled,
The worshippers no longer marched,
But in their place Nala heard a voice.

“O Goddess, please save my home.”

Nala shuddered at the voice,
Letting go of the hand in shock,

In turn resuming the world,
That he had momentarily stopped.

The youth looked around him,
To see two hundreds hands begin to dangle.
Each resembling a vine.
Each begging to be held.

Nala, still unsure,
Of what it was that he had heard,
Held the same hand again,
This time led by curiousity instead of desperation.

“O Goddess, why do you let this continue to happen?
Do I ask too much of you?”

Releasing the hand of the worshipper,
Nala found his touch made him one with their thoughts.
That when his hand touched theirs,
The youth could hear their prayers.

Nala looked ahead,
To find Devi strolling back to his side.
“Forgive me, Nala, for the joy of deciphering this code,
Blinded me of your march.”

“Why have you stopped, my friend?
Is it the hands that dangle from above?
What do you make of it?

Do you think that it is a sign?"

Nala embraced Devi.
"Come here, my friend, and you will see.
Hold this hand above my head,
And you shall hear what lies beneath their hums."

As the two held the hand,
The voice of the worshipper returned,
But now flowing through both,
Nala and Devi's minds.

"O Goddess, I have prayed for decades,
Asking for your grace's sway,
But with every visit, my home strays even further,
From any semblance of being free."

"For how long must our land soak in our own blood?
For how long must my people count our dead?
What did my people do to deserve this fate?
All I want, Goddess, is for you to save my one home."

"Save my land, save my people,
Save who we are from being erased.
I have dreamt every day of returning,
To a home where I did not doubt that I belonged."

"Tell me O Goddess,
Will that day ever come?

Or am I fool?
Left to beg alone?"

"Hear my prayers, O Goddess,
Save my home from what fate signals.
My land is my only pearl,
I beg of you. I beg of you."

Nala and Devi trembled,
Hearing the worshipper's pleas,
And while unaware of the home they pleaded for,
The two felt that they had heard these words before.

Neither Nala nor Devi,
Discussed what they did next,
As the two then proceeded,
To hear the prayers of every hand.

Both were convinced,
That if the Goddess would not listen to the hums,
That they would ensure these prayers,
Did not fall on deaf ears.

The two held each hand with love,
And the more that they listened,
The more that they were certain,
That these worshippers were no different than them.

For these worshippers yearned for home,

Just as Nala and Devi,
Only their wishes were disguised,
Beneath the bellow of their hums.

Some had lost their land,
Some had lost their loved ones.
Some had lost everything,
That had made them feel whole.

But what united them all,
Was that they all chased after a home.
While what they defined as home differed,
They all prayed the Goddess answer.

Nala and Devi weaved through the worshippers,
Holding every hand in their sight,
Both unaware that three moons had passed,
Since they had first entered the mist.

The last hand of the hundred,
Was the hand of an elderly woman,
One who was older,
Than any worshipper that had come before,

Her hands worn and wrinkled,
From decades of labour and life,
Nala and Devi grasped her shriveled hand,
Curious what her heart would tell.

“Oh amma, tell me what I have done,
To greet death on this foreign land.
Was it truly here that I was meant to leave,
To depart this world for yours?”

“You had told me that one day,
I could return to a free Eelam,
But the war rages just as when I left,
As my hope continues to fade.”

“You led me to Canada,
Telling me my home was no longer safe,
And it is as I lie here that I wonder,
Whether you had any intention of leading me back.”

“Do you remember before the war,
When I lived with you amongst the green?
When I would see your abode touch the skies,
From every direction that I walked?

“But now in this new land,
I live in concrete towers,
And I look down to see you living meagerly,
Amongst the metal machines.”

“I thought this was all temporary,
That one day you would return me home,
But home seems further away,
With every passing hour.”

“I remember when I first,
Went to your temple that grazed the ground,
And became fixated by the miniature,
That sat at your helm.”

“Is that not what your model told me?
That I would one day return?
To see your temple in the skies?
Or was it all just a lie?

“I have watched as our people,
Have been massacred in the thousands,
As my land was decimated,
By the shells dropped from above.”

“All this I have watched,
From the comfort of my concrete tower,
As I fear that I will die,
Only having seen photos of my home in pieces.”

“For my brothers and my sisters,
Lie buried in Eelam’s earth,
So tell me amma, will I be buried alongside them?
Or will I be buried here?”

Nala let go of the hand,
And began to hyperventilate.
And Devi realizing his reaction,
Let go as well to embrace the youth.

“Whatever is wrong, Nala?
Is it something that she said?”
“It does not matter, Devi,” he said,
Brushing away his tears.

“Let us focus on leaving this forest,
For we have spoken to every hand that has called.
It is due time for the Goddess,
To present a path for us to leave.”

Devi, seeing through Nala’s lies,
But aware that he was correct,
Agreed that it was time,
That they moved on from this forest.

Nala led the way,
Now weaving effortlessly to the hums,
While Devi trailed a step behind,
To ensure he did not break.

And it was as Devi trailed,
That she became entranced by the cry of a worshipper,
One she had yet to hear,
Tears that did not fall on Nala’s ears.

Devi decided to veer,
From Nala’s guidance to hear the soul,
Certain that she needed,
To listen to their torment.

And that was when Devi,
Saw a hand that she did not recall holding,
One much younger,
Than the ones she had held before.

She reached out to the hand,
Locking her fingers with theirs,
Only to hear a familiar voice,
A voice that resembled Nala's.

"O Goddess, is this my home,
If it is the land that I was born to?
Or is my home the land,
That I have yet to set foot in?"

"Amma and appa say proudly,
Their home is both Canada and Eelam,
But why do I hesitate,
To call either my home?

"In one I am a foreigner,
No matter if I was born to its land,
And in the other a war continues,
Over whether I am worthy of life."

"In both I am seen as less than,
Just for being Tamil.
Is this my uncontestable fate,
Will I one day feel at home?"

“Tell me O Goddess,
Where will I feel the belonging that I crave?
Does such a land exist,
Will I ever meet her shores?”

“Is it Eelam?
The land that crowns the lone tear?
The land that beckons me?
The land I was promised to be born to?”

“Or is it Canada?
The land a million miles away?
The land that adopted my kin?
The land I would be born to?”

“Where will I feel whole, O Goddess,
Please take me to where I belong,
Take me, O Goddess.
I am yours, I am yours.”

It was as Devi heard these final words,
That Nala arrived back to her,
To tell her that he had found,
An anomaly in the forest.

As Nala took Devi’s hand,
And guided her to what he had found,
Devi looked into his eyes,
With profound endearment.

She had never noticed the sadness,
That hung beneath Nala's brow,
A heaviness that only now,
She could attempt to decipher.

And as she stared deeper,
Reminded of all that she had learned of the youth,
She knew the hand that she had just held,
Had somehow manifested from his.

That Nala did not know,
What home he was returning to,
And he was hoping that the Goddess,
Would guide him to the right one.

Nala, much calmer than before,
Then looked to Devi and smiled,
"Here we are, Devi.
This must be our exit."

The youth had led Devi,
To a wall of clouds,
Where the mist fell from the skies,
And met the water at their ankles.

As the two walked towards the clouds,
They watched the legs of the worshippers begin to slow,
And the hums of their prayers slur,
Before they all came to a full stop.

Nala and Devi held their breath,
Squeezing the other's hands.
As they stepped into the clouds,
In hope of a way home.

Now on the other side,
The two found themselves back in a familiar channel,
Its waters resting comfortably,
Still residing by their ankles.

And while mist may have shrouded,
What it was that lied ahead,
The thousand lotuses that floated now at their feet,
Told them that the worshippers were long gone.

But before Nala and Devi could celebrate,
Their escape from the forest,
The two felt a weight,
Sinking into their shoulders.

Nala and Devi looked around them,
Realizing that they could only see the other's feet,
For their hands had been forced apart,
And a distance had formed between them.

And within this distance,
An object floated next to their heads,
Supported only by what now sank,
Deep into their shoulders.

Nala grabbed a hold,
Of the weight by his neck,
His arms caressing its mass,
To deduce what it was.

But Devi, familiar with its embrace,
Did no such thing,
For she knew that these were timber poles,
That rested upon their shoulders.

Nala looked up to see,
What it was they held between them.
What was it that needed to be cradled,
Between two poles.

And that was when Nala,
Saw the golden palanquin.
Adorned in white cloth,
Decorated in garlands.

As the youth knew in that moment,
What had come of the procession.
For they had exchanged one march,
To instead lead another.

Our Procession is Our Protest

Book II

Our Procession is Our Protest

Book II

To unravel the layered histories embedded within the temple, one must walk the path of its strict, dynamic procession. This journey is initiated through one's physical movement through its space and their interaction with its artifacts paired to the holy mantras of its priests. This action known as *pradakshina*, or circumambulation, asks the worshipper to circle clockwise around the temple and its altars. The *pradakshina* enters the body into a realm of transition, moving through states of consciousness as one nears their confrontation with the divine.[12] It is during this path that one slowly deciphers the truth within their temple – with each rotation revealing fragments of a people's past to those willing to look.

On May 18, 2009, in the lagoons of Mullivaikal, 26 years of Civil War would conclude as the Sri Lankan Army would defeat the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In its final months, over 40,000 Tamil civilians would be massacred, either targeted or in the crossfire, and in response, the Eelam Tamil diaspora took to their adopted streets in protest.[13]

What began as contained rallies, grew as the atrocities

12 Mitchell, *The Hindu Temple*, 66.

13 Gordon Weiss, *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka & the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers* (London: Random House, 2011), 1-10.

continued to mount, with the collective community coming together to demand international intervention and an immediate ceasefire. These demands would not be met regardless of the diaspora's continued pressure, as the dream of self-determination would be conceded and a genocide would mark the war's end.[14] But these protests also served as a pivotal moment for their community's second generation, as the public demonstration of their collective suffering would contribute to their conception of home. From the discrimination that sparked the beginnings of the war, to the continued persecution that fueled militant action, the protest became a watershed moment where a generation confronted the stories that led to their Canadian birth. To understand the scope of the stories shared through chants, banners, and discussions, the following will now detail a brief history of the ethnic tensions that continue to flare in Sri Lanka.

An ethno-nationalist conflict, the Civil War rose between the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority and the Tamil minority – the former represented by the presiding Sinhalese government's army, and the latter led by the LTTE. The Tamil rebels were a representation of a people pushed to desperation, driven by the dream of the separate state of Tamil Eelam.[15] But this conflict was not birthed solely from ethnic grounds, instead its seeds were first sown by the watchful eyes of imperialism. The nationalism and extremism that propelled the war's hatred can ultimately be traced to the centuries of occupation that Sri Lanka was once subject to.

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14 Amarnath Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Social Movement Activism and the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Canada.* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2015), 97-141.

15 Wilson, A. Jeyaratnam, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism: Its Origins and Development in the 19th and 20th Centuries.* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 113-135.

Ceylon, the island's previous name, is a tear-shaped nation located beneath India, and while once a haven for flourishing kingdoms, was eventually passed between colonial hands. From the Portuguese to the Dutch, to the Dutch to the British, much of its modern politics were a result of a loss of identity inflicted by this time.

The island was and continues to be comprised of a majority Sinhalese-Buddhist population that lived alongside various other smaller communities, including the minority Tamil populations of the northern and eastern provinces. Unlike the Portuguese and Dutch that treated the Tamil areas as a separate entity, the British addressed the whole of the island through a centralized government.[16] This centralization and a preference towards the Tamil people, whom they employed in other British colonies, led to the frustrations and Sinhala nationalist sentiment that would fuel the decades ahead. And so upon independence in 1948, similar to other naive British decolonization efforts, the majority-Sinhalese-Buddhists were given absolute, unmitigated control.[17] No guard rails were put in place to ensure the rights of the minority populations, as decades of building Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist sentiment would propel the fate of the nation. The government would run on the belief that Ceylon was rightfully a purely Sinhalese state, "seeing their role as rectifying perceived inequities by directing resources away from the Tamils and toward their own ethnic group."[18]

In 1956, the Sinhala-led government would pass the Sinhala

16 Asoka Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy.* (London: Routledge, 2009).

17 Wilson, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism*, 66-81.

18 Rebecca Knuth, *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries: Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction.* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 81.

Only Act, passing to law Sinhala as the official language of Ceylon.[19] In 1972, the nation's name would be changed from Ceylon to Sri Lanka, while also adopting Buddhism as the nation's official religion.[20] These mounting self-serving legislations that sought to Sinhalize the new nation would be paired with anti-Tamil riots, the largest being in 1956, 1958, 1977, and 1981. Together, these events would lead to the 1976 Vaddukodai Resolution, where Tamil representatives would put forward the motion to establish a separate Tamil state.[21] This proposal for a separate nation, compromised of the Tamil-majority northern and eastern provinces, would be referred to as Tamil Eelam and its dream would steer the decade ahead.

The proposal for Eelam would unsurprisingly be declined, as no avenue seemed to remain for a productive conversation. And so as Sri Lanka increasingly mobilized for the Sinhala people, the systematic discrimination and the influx of riots radicalized Tamils and their nationalism towards militancy. This desperation on the part of the Tamil people to survive would lead to the rise of various militant groups, of which the LTTE would emerge as the leaders in the conflict ahead.[22] In 1983, an ambush by the LTTE would prompt the largest anti-Tamil riot, as Black July would see 2500 Tamils murdered and commence 26 years of Civil War.

This war was subject to many pauses and suffered a great deal to international intervention, as much of the life force of the LTTE was fed by its neighbours and its diasporic transnational network. But for a multitude of reasons, from

19 Bandarage, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka*, 43.

20 Ibid, 64.

21 Ibid, 71.

22 Wilson, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism*, 114-135.

internal rifts to the War on Terror, in 2009 the LTTE was narrowed into Mullivaikal, where they and their leader were slaughtered and eliminated.

On May 12, 2009, on Mother's Day, 6 days before the war's end, the Eelam Tamil community ascended the Gardiner Expressway in protest.[23] This was, I argue, the moment that the second-generation's first *pradakshina* came to a close, where they realized their procession had shifted to a funerary march. The 2009 protests was where a generation confronted their peoples' stories, realizing the history that they had never been told. These stories would follow them back to their temple walls, where from that moment forward, stories of Rama would be joined by the stories of a home they had never met.

The protest is an act of desperation, but it is also a means to tell stories, where a community comes together to share their pain in hope of empathy and action. It is a procession that at its core shifts between states of consciousness, and so in the streets of 2009, the second-generation experienced a revelation from their people.

Amarnath Amarasingam provides a nuanced understanding of the feelings of this protest, interviewing the children of this generation and their feelings towards what occurred. The resounding emotions being that it was a moment where their history had been unveiled, as they marched with pride and grief through Toronto's streets, realizing what had been left behind and what was now lost.[24]

23 Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics.*121-123.

24 Ibid, 169-194.

What are you doing, father?

I'm searching for my heart, which fell away that night.

Do you think you'll find it here?

Where else am I going to find it? I bend to the ground and pick it up piece by piece just as the women of the fellahin pick up olives in October, one olive at a time.

But you're picking up pebbles!

Doing that is a good exercise for memory and perception. Who knows? Maybe these pebbles are petrified pieces of my heart. And even if they're not, I would still have gotten used to the effort of searching on my own for something that made me feel lost when it was lost. The mere act of searching is proof that I refuse to get lost in my loss. The other side of this effort is the proof that I am in fact lost as long as I have not found what I have lost.

MAHMOUD DARWISH
THE MOON DID NOT FALL INTO THE WELL
trans. Ibrahim Muhawi



Fig. 12. Book II Frontispiece: *Our Procession is Our Protest*

The Pallbearers

Chapter I

Nala tried all that he could,
To peer within the palanquin,
To see who it was,
That its curtains hid.

But with each attempt that he made,
The timber sunk deeper into his shoulder,
As if warning him of the future,
He would find should he look.

Devi too tried,
To gaze within the palanquin,
To see what she hoped,
Were the eyes of the Goddess.

But no matter how she tried,
To look within the abode,
The timber was quick to tell,
That it was not yet time.

Nala and Devi felt the palanquin,
Testing their strength with each step,
But as if aware of what they held,
Their arms refused to let go.

And so as the two marched through the river,
Their arms coiled around the timber's length.
They knew not of where they were going,
The lotuses at their ankles, their only guide.

For it was only when the mist,
Began to part ahead,
That they saw in arms reach,
What pushed the blossoms forward.

For Nala and Devi found,
That they were not alone in this procession,
Each marching between two others,
Their identities remaining a mystery.

With one pallbearer ahead,
And another behind,
The two's vision was impaired,
Unknown to what lay ahead and what had passed.

All that stood in sight,
Was what lied at each other's sides,
For all Nala and Devi could see,
Were the legs of the other.

As Nala marched between the pallbearers,
What was most apparent was their size.
For the physique of the two figures,
Was twice that of Nala and Devi's.

And while Nala did try,
To catch a glimpse of their faces,
Any sign of who they were,
Was veiled by the palanquin's shadow.

Nala took this for a sign,
That their guidance outweighed such knowledge,
That these four were not meant,
To be approached by a mere youth.

Devi meanwhile took this,
As a challenge to conquer,
Doing all that she could,
To acquire their attention.

But no matter how she tried,
All that she would find,
Is that just like the worshippers,
The pallbearers shared their same complexion.

It was then that worry struck Devi,
That perhaps Nala had not escaped the forest,
That perhaps it was the legs,
Of another that peeked below.

Devi called out for Nala,
To relieve her of her doubts,
But to also hear again,
A familiar soothing voice.

“I hear you, Devi,” replied Nala,
Marching from the other side.
“I would never leave you, my friend,
Without fulfilling my promise.”

“For I will be by your side,
Until you have found your thambi.
You have my word, Devi.
I will not leave you to march alone.”

Devi exhaled in relief,
Thanking the Goddess for her mercy,
For not abandoning her friend,
As their exile marched ahead.

“You have my gratitude, Nala,
Bless you and your heart.
For I do not know if I have the strength,
To face these riddles alone.”

“But tell me, do you too march,
With timber on your shoulders?
Do you too march between two mute figures,
Just as I do?”

Nala readjusted his posture,
Calmed by Devi’s words,
Reminded that he too,
Was not alone in this venture.

“I do, Devi, but do you know,
What we hold on our shoulders?
What is within this palanquin,
That requires the strength of six?”

Devi looked up again,
Mesmerized by its golden stature.
At this ornate artifact that rested,
On both of their shoulders.

“I do not know, Nala,
But I have accepted it as the Goddess’ game.
Let us play by Her rules,
As we are bound to Her path.”

“For surely these four strangers,
Are a creation by the Goddess,
And should we trust them, surely,
They will guide us to where we need to be.”

Nala and Devi continued their trek,
The pallbearers leading their stride,
As they continued their solemn march,
Into the hazy horizon.

But the further they trekked,
The more the river rose,
Until she settled above their waists,
Her lotuses grazing their elbows.

The two watched as the mist,
Too began to lift,
Parting in its entirety,
To reveal what lied at the river's edge.

And that is when Nala and Devi,
Saw what made these shores unique,
For they had been paved in asphalt,
Towered by a sea of snow-dipped evergreens.

While a winter seemed to have passed,
Over the shores they grazed,
The sky showed no sign,
That its flurry would return.

For the grey of the ashram,
That Nala and Devi were accustomed to,
Had been replaced by the red,
Of a bloodshot sky.

And as Nala marched beneath it,
He could not help but stare,
At the peculiar landscape,
That lied against his side.

The blackness of the shore,
That had leveled what had come before.
The whiteness of the trees,
That had powdered every needle.

The redness of the sky,
That had consumed every cloud.
Nala felt an unreasonable attachment,
To everything that he saw.

He wanted to run along the shore,
Barefoot against the asphalt,
His fingers brushing against the pine,
And his hair running against the sky's fire.

The youth wanted to leave the procession,
And feel the blisters that would form from this desire,
But his daydream was cut short,
By a faint rustle from the pines.

For the youth watched from the river,
As a man leapt from the trees.
Rolling onto the shore,
Glaring at their procession.





Peeking Beneath Ebony Coats

Chapter II

When the man stood up,
Nala finally saw who had interrupted his daze,
As a dark-skinned man, twice his age,
Stood distressed on the shore.

Nala was intrigued by the man,
At the conflicting garments he wore,
As each half looked to dress,
For two opposing climates.

For the man's lower half,
Was wrapped in a traditional, flowing vetti,
While his upper half was concealed,
By a thick, ebony coat.

It was then that Nala heard,
Another rustle from the pines,
As a mother and her decade-young daughter,
Ran to the man's side.

They too wore ebony coats,
That ended at their waists,
But instead of a vetti,
The pleats of a lehenga peeked from beneath.

As Nala marched by the family,
Their eyes locked with his,
And at this glance, the youth knew,
That they shared an uncertain bond.

Nala then heard another rustle,
Followed by another, and then another,
As a thousand families suddenly,
Stormed the asphalt shore.

Mothers and fathers, sons and daughters,
Sisters and brothers, grandmothers and grandfathers.
They all stormed the shore,
Appearing from beyond the pines.

Devi too witnessed,
A similar rush along her shore,
As families lined themselves,
Along both edges of the river.

Nala and Devi wondered,
What it was that these families planned to do,
Until suddenly they all held hands,
And began to chant in unison.

“We want justice!
We want it now!”

The human chain occupied,

The length of both shores,
As no matter how far they marched,
The two could not escape the endless string.

They wondered why the families,
Stood by the shores.
Why their fingers locked,
Why they continued to chant their seven words.

Nala had first thought,
That the thousands prayed to their palanquin,
That they saw what he could not,
That the palanquin spoke through what it hid.

But as he listened to their calls,
And noticed the pain in their eyes,
Nala knew they sought not blessings,
But something that felt all too familiar to hear.

It was then that Nala heard gunfire,
Spattering in the distance,
Rounds upon rounds,
Being shot into the air.

Nala, visibly startled,
Began to tremble as he marched,
But the families did not flinch,
Their chants invigorated by the flurry.

The gunfire however,
Was only the beginning of the chaos,
As its spatters were soon drowned,
By the beating of propellers.

From where it came,
Nala could not discern,
But it was not long before he felt,
It's gusts swarm the river and its shores.

The families fastened their grips,
And Nala and Devi clenched onto the timber,
No soul willing to give in,
To the winds and their strength.

Then suddenly everything stopped,
And a silence blanketed the river,
Where the wails of a thousand,
Men, women, and children were heard in the distance.

The wails filled the world,
For what was only three seconds,
Before a flurry of shells,
Silenced their noise.

And when the families heard this silence,
Their chain broke in an instant.
Their chants ending mid-beat.
A cloud of despair settling over them.

Each face filled with devastation,
Then anger, then purpose,
Before they all turned around,
And scattered back into the pines.

Nala and Devi had no moment,
To process what they had just seen,
Marching onwards at the behest,
Of the pallbearers' march.

Devi wondered of the identities,
Of the thousand that had wailed.
Why did the families flee,
Upon hearing their cries?

Meanwhile, Nala tried his earnest,
To forget what he had heard,
Trembling at what he was certain,
Was wails he had heard before.

It was then that a familiar rustle,
Interrupted their thoughts,
As the two watched from their respective sides,
As a child returned to their shores.

And right behind this child,
Was another child from before,
And then came another child,
Followed by another, and then another.

A thousand children now stood on the shore,
Their feet planted in the asphalt,
Each grappling a stalk of bamboo,
That stood twice their height.

Tied to these stalks were red flags,
With golden emblems that roared.
Its fabric large enough,
To blanket a family of three.

Nala and Devi watched,
As the flags waved beneath the crimson sky,
Both unaware of the feelings,
That were slowly resurfacing from a distant time.

The two had both seen,
This very flag before,
Both familiar with its golden emblem,
But were not certain from where or how.

Encircled by 33 bullets,
In a sea of red fabric,
A golden tiger growled,
With claws ready to pounce.

Ready to seize the bayonets,
That crisscrossed behind its mane,
Ready to march forward,
Alongside its fellow cadres.

This flag had a history,
But the two were unaware yet of how it fit into theirs,
Fighting back conflicting feelings,
Of hope and dread at its sight.

The children continued to wave their flags,
But did not breathe a single word,
Speechless as if they did not know,
What it was they should say.

And that was when a voice,
Cried from beyond the pines.
“We want justice! We want it now!”
It chanted over and over.

“We want justice! We want it now!”
Chanted another voice from the opposing pines.

“We want justice! We want it now!”
Chanted thousands of voices from every direction.

And that was when the children’s families,
Returned to their side,
As tens of thousands marched from the evergreens,
Chanting with a vigour that Nala had seen before.

Some clenched onto flags,
While others carried banners,
Some lifted picket signs,

While others pumped their fists.

The children watched in awe,
Mouthing their elders' chants as they waved,
Until finally every child found the courage,
To speak their own piece.

"We want justice! We want it now!"
They all yelled in unison,
Before taking the hands of their elders,
And guiding the demonstration into the river.

For Nala and Devi were no longer,
Alone with the silent pallbearers.
Now marching alongside chanting families,
In a protest through the river.

Tigers Flailing, Falling Leaves

Chapter III

While Nala and Devi could only see,
The families that walked by their side,
They could still hear the thousands,
That both preceded and trailed their steps.

Devi had become obsessed,
At deciphering this protest,
Trying to understand,
For what reason they chanted as they did.

She watched as the families,
Trudged in their ebony coats,
Brushing against lotuses,
As their lower half hid beneath the water.

As Devi too treaded,
She saw a mother marching by her side,
Noting the mix of fatigue and despair,
That sculpted her aging face.

It was a feature that Devi had seen,
Whenever she glanced at her own reflection,
And with each face that passed,
Devi realized that she and the mother were not unique.

It was only when she saw a child,
That she noticed something different,
Uncovering a mix of fear and innocence,
That reminded Devi of Nala.

Devi watched as the child's flag,
Fluttered as they marched,
Its tiger racing through her mind,
As she felt her pendant beginning to warm.

It was then that Devi saw another flag,
Flying amongst the tiger,
This flag painted in red,
A three-lobed leaf at its centre.

The two flags danced together,
Beneath the crimson sky,
As Devi watched as the tigers flailed,
Amongst the falling leaves.

But this gaze was cut short,
As Devi's attention became attracted to whispers,
As she listened to a family next to her,
Discuss what they flew.

The mother flew the flag
Adorned with the three-lobed leaf,
Her words clearly opposing,
The ascent of the tiger.

While the father flew the flag,
Of the roaring beast,
Repeatedly refusing,
To march without it.

"It is Eelam's flag,"
The father explained to his wife,
"It is the Tiger's flag,"
Said the worried mother in response.

"For I know why you wave it,
But they will not listen if we fly our flag,"
To which the father pointed to what the mother held,
"And you think they will listen if you fly theirs?"

A silence then persisted,
Between both the mother and the father,
Until finally their child,
Broke their uncomfortable pause,

"Then, amma, appa,
What should we be flying?
What flag is ours?
What flag will make them listen?"

Devi's heart dropped,
At the words of the child,
But had also grown perplexed,
At the flag of the tiger described as Eelam's.

But before she could investigate further,
And listen at length to the families' whispers,
Her thoughts were interrupted again,
By a sudden increase in chants.

As what began as one chant,
Had now grown into hundreds.
Hundreds that overlapped,
And muffled one another.

As Devi finally put together,
That this was no homogenous group,
As from the flags and the chants,
There was no message they all stood by.

It was this confusion that shifted,
Her eyes towards their banners and signs,
Reading their slogans,
In search of an answer.

RECOGNIZE TAMIL'S RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION
L.T.T.E. FIGHTS FOR TAMIL RIGHTS IN EELAM

LIFT THE BAN ON THE TAMIL TIGERS
O CANADA, DO NOT BE COMPLICIT

STOP THE TAMIL GENOCIDE IN EELAM

Devi's head began to spin.
"Eelam... Genocide... Canada..."
She muttered over and over,
Realizing that these were Nala's two homes.

That the home Nala had never seen,
Was on the brink of destruction,
And this protest was a plea for help,
To the home that he had never met.

Reading each passing sign,
Devi listened to the overlapping chants,
Admiring the flags that waved,
Until she put together this protest's purpose.

For home to these families,
Was not just a place.
It was their land, their people,
Their identity, their freedom.

For this protest was a plea,
For someone to save their home,
For someone to rise above,
To save it from being erased.

It was at this realization that Devi,
Witnessed a carousel of picket signs,
Each with a different portrait,
Of the pain that coursed through their blood.

Dismembered bodies, deified martyrs,
Shelled landscapes, desecrated buildings.
All passing by,
As the slogans and chants rang in Devi's head.

Every image Devi saw,
Broke her bit-by-bit,
As she was soon left to question,
What it was that she felt.

If what she felt was indeed empathy,
Or in fact a buried pain,
A buried pain towards a memory,
That she no longer remembered.

For while she may be from Lanka,
These families were Tamil just like her,
And in that moment, she too felt,
That she was from Eelam.

And it was then that Devi saw,
A father carrying an image of a charred building,
A building with three domes,
And an altar at its entrance.

Her heart began to race,
When she saw a familiar window on its facade,
Reminded instantly of the arrangement,
Of a room that lied within.

“Look at what they did to Eelam’s library,”
Chanted the enraged father,
As Devi looked down,
To feel her pendant begin to glow.

Devi raised her head again,
Certain her thambi once sat within,
But when she looked up, the father and his sign,
Had long but marched away.

Devi then realized,
That if what the father said was true,
That the library was from Eelam,
Then her Lanka and Nala’s home were the same.

It was this connection,
That enlightened all for Devi,
As she realized how foolish she had been,
To miss all the signs.

That the Goddess had done all she could,
To make Devi realize this one fact,
That she and Nala shared a home,
And were both bound for Eelam.

But this excitement was short lived,
As she realized the history she had learned,
Was the history of her own home,
For it had gone through peril at her exile.

Devi, taking a breath,
Knew she needed to tell Nala all that she had learned,
But she also knew that her message
Would not make it through the families' chants.

And so Devi looked up to the palanquin,
That still sat on her shoulders,
And prayed to the Goddess that Nala,
Had found out on his own.

Devi then took one arm off the timber,
And pumped her fist in the air.
Before admiring the families next to her,
And joining in their chants.

"We want justice!
We want it now!"

Our Home is Tamil Eelam

Chapter IV

For ever since he had witnessed,
The children entering the river,
An endless sea of misery,
Had seized Nala's spirit.

The youth now bowed his head,
As he trudged through the water,
Fixating on drifting lotuses,
So as to not lock eyes with the families.

But while Nala may have impaired his sight,
His ears still remained vulnerable,
Succumbing to the hundreds of chants,
That came one after another.

Nala wallowed as he listened,
And while he tried to maintain his composure,
The chants of the children echoed in his ears,
Bringing the youth to tears.

It was then that Nala heard a voice,
A voice calling out his name,
But when he raised his head, to see who called,
There was no one that met his eyes.

Nala was certain that this was the Goddess,
That she had manifested in his midst,
But as his eyes sifted through the families,
He found no one returning his gaze.

But this search of Nala's was not fruitless,
For he soon became entranced by a sign,
As looming over him and within arm's reach,
The youth began to sob while reading its words.

OUR HOME IS TAMIL EELAM

Printed in bold red type,
Its letters melted over an island,
A lone tear in an endless sea,
Ready to be swallowed whole.

The red of each letter converged,
Into a single, narrow stream,
Pouring over the tip of the island,
And soaking its northern and eastern shores.

For the trail of blood formed a wishbone,
Crowning the lone tear,
As Nala knew without hesitation,
The story behind its twin path.

For this crown was Tamil Eelam,
The home that he once marched for,
As Nala suddenly remembered,
Why this had felt so familiar from the start.

This protest was a memory,
A memory reenacted from a decade ago,
When he himself marched for Eelam,
Holding the very sign that he now admired.

But before Nala could spiral,
Over how his past replayed before him,
He was interrupted by the soothing voice,
That had moments ago called out to him.

The voice continued to call his name,
Its tone soaked in worry,
Only for Nala to discover,
It belonged to the holder of his sign.

With one hand caressing the island,
And the other projecting her voice,
A mother was calling out for Nala,
To return to her side.

But before Nala could answer,
Or even attempt to abandon the palanquin,
A boy less than a decade old,
Ran to the mother's side.

Amma's Truth

Chapter V

"I am here, amma. Do not worry.
My heart was just caught by all the familiar faces,
For I have never seen so many of us gather,
With such united purpose."

"Tell me again, amma,
Why is it that we are all here together?
Why is it that we march,
Through this river side-by-side?"

"We march in protest, Nala,
In hopes of freeing Eelam from its misfortune,
For we have all come together to do all we can,
To save our home from Yama."

"But, amma, if Eelam is our home,
Then what of Canada?
Was I not born to its land?
Is Canada not my home?"

"Of course it is, Nala,
But so too is Eelam,
For we are not limited in this life,
To claiming just one home."

"You see, Nala,
While I may have left Eelam decades ago,
She will always be my home,
No matter where I settle."

"And as for you,
While you may have never felt her humid breeze,
There will come a day,
When you find yourself on her shores."

"And when that day comes,
Tell her that she is your home,
And Eelam will kiss you as she once kissed me,
And grant you access to her world."

"For no matter where we settle or where we are born,
Eelam will always be a home to you and I.
And so we march today, Nala, to save our home,
From being extinguished by Lanka's wrath."

"Forgive me, amma, but whatever do you mean?
Extinguished by Lanka's wrath?
What is it that happens in Eelam?
Why does she need to be saved?"

"Nala, do you remember,
When I told you of why I fled?
Of why I fled from Eelam,
And settled on Canada's shores?"

"Yes, I do, amma.
You told me vaguely of why.
Problems regarding land had escalated into war,
Eelam was no longer safe for you and your kin."

"That you fled to Canada,
In search of a better life.
So that when you would one day birth me,
I would not live a life in fear."

"That is true, Nala,
But on account of your age,
I regret to tell you,
That I did not speak the whole truth."

"That the war was not just a fight,
Over land and its politics,
But a result of our struggle,
To ensure our people had a home."

"For I was born not to Eelam,
But to an island called Lanka,
An island where as a child we learned,
Not being Sinhala was a burden."

"For they were the majority,
And we, a piece of the minority.
And any attempt to question their rule,
Was seen as an attack at their identity."

“I remember vividly of when their courts deemed,
Their language as superior,
And when they introduced quotas to our universities,
That targeted only our youth.”

“I remember watching as our elders left,
Each morning to fight through their systems,
Only to watch as they returned defeated,
Night after night after night.”

“As the decades passed it became clear,
That Lanka could no longer be our home,
And that was when in Vadukoddai,
We decided to carve our home from the lone tear.”

“Tamil Eelam was what we called it,
A land that was rightfully ours,
A land independent of Lanka,
Where we would be free from ethnic persecution.”

“But the separation we proposed,
Only escalated their resentment,
As their nationalist rhetoric, encouraged riots,
To tear through our villages.”

“And it was as our hope for Eelam dwindled,
And the pain of our people grew,
That many my age traded peaceful demonstrations,
For calculated, armed militancy.”

“Many groups would rise,
And many would fall,
But in the end it was the Tigers that stood in the dust,
Representing our people against the armies of Lanka.”

“And as I look back at it now,
It was clear what was yet to come,
But at the time none of us expected,
What would unfold that summer night.”

“For after three decades of sporadic hostility,
One pogram would stand above the rest,
Rendering our skies permanently black,
Leaving scars that still sting at their touch.”

“As over the course of a moon,
Thousands would be murdered by the majority,
While hundreds of livelihoods would be reduced to ash,
And thus began the war that still rages today.”

“I tell you all this, Nala,
Because you must now know both what and why Eelam is,
For while Canada may say that I arrived from Lanka,
It is the unrealized Eelam that I will always call my home.”

“For while some see Lanka,
As the jewel that rests in the ocean,
I will always see it as the tear,
Upon which the blood of Eelam rests.”

"Thank you, amma,
For telling me the truth in its whole,
But I must also confess to you,
That I know much of what you tell me."

"While I may have never felt,
The humid breeze of Eelam,
There is much that I have stitched together,
Just by being by your side."

"I have sat next to you,
As you read through your daily paper,
As you flipped past the vivid images,
Of the dismembered and the dead."

"I have sat next to you,
As you took phone calls with our loved ones in Eelam,
As you calmed their thoughts telling them,
That hope still remains."

"I have sat next you,
As you prayed in every temple, in every warehouse,
As you murmured to the Goddess,
Begging her to relieve Eelam of her pain."

"I know it all, amma,
For I have seen all you have done,
But I thank you for I have long awaited,
To hear the truth from your lips."

"But there is still one detail,
That I cannot seem to comprehend,
For what reason do we protest as we do today?
Why do I feel a fury that I have not felt in years past?"

"Nala, the conflict appears,
To have entered its final, ruthless stage,
As we hear the cries of the men, women, and children,
With every step that we take."

"For while we may have each began this protest,
Chanting our own unresolved grief,
We now chant in unison,
To save our people from becoming victims to its end."

"For much has happened since the war began,
Many joined the Tigers, while many fled like I,
But there were also many that could do neither,
While others chose simply to stay."

"These Tamils became targets,
Innocent victims to the war,
Labelled as Tigers or affiliates,
As the island equated being Tamil with being a threat."

"Hundreds of thousands were murdered,
And many more were forcibly disappeared,
But so long as we had the Tigers,
Our people did not concede hope."

“We hung onto our dream that one day,
It would all be worth it,
That we would thwart Lanka’s armies,
And finally liberate Eelam.”

“But over the last three moons,
The armies of Lanka have seized all of Eelam,
Pushing the Tigers east towards the lagoons,
As they near their final stand.”

“Now the armies of Lanka converge,
On the Tigers, ready to exterminate every cadre,
Every citizen, every Tamil in their path,
To claim a decisive victory over our people.”

“But to answer your question, Nala,
Of what motivates our stride today,
While initially difficult to speak as one,
It seems we finally all have met common ground.”

“Some said that they were here,
To support the crumbling Tigers,
To tell the world the lunacy,
Of labelling freedom fighters as terrorists.”

“While others said that they were here,
To protest the complacency of the world,
Who for decades turned a blind eye,
Or outright funded the war that wanes.”

“Some even said they were here,
Having lost hope.
Taking to the river strictly,
So that their unresolved grief could perhaps be heard.”

“But you see, Nala,
With each step that every one of us took,
We could each feel the fear,
Of the thousands that suffered in Eelam.”

“And then when we finally heard,
The wails of the thousand men, women, and children,
We knew that despite why we arrived,
We would now march united for them.”

“For those thousand were our people,
Falling prey to Lanka’s armies,
And the shell that silenced their cries,
Was their sentence to death.”

“With each step the river tells us,
Of the rape and murder of our people.
As those goons trap our brothers and sisters,
And enact whatever their heart desires.”

“With each step the river tells us,
Of the necessities they prevent from being delivered,
As those goons starve our people,
And shell those that even manage to conjure kanji.”

“With each step the river tells us,
Of every hospital they have shelled,
Betraying our people that believed,
That these were havens that they could trust.”

“And now we are told that they have created areas,
They promised to not fire into,
Only to herd our people in,
And shoot at them as sport.”

“And that is why we march, Nala,
Because the world must know of this genocide,
And it is our responsibility,
To ensure that someone intervenes.”

“For if it is Canada that hears these chants,
All that we ask is they intervene,
Convince the island to declare a ceasefire,
Against our crippling people.”

“But if it is the Goddess that listens,
All we ask is for one boon.
Save our people from death,
For they are our home before all else.”

Nala watched as the mother began to sob,
But before he could reach out for her cheek,
Her son held her hand and wiped away her tears,
As the mother began to smile.

Nala sighed, looking up at the sign,
That the mother held instead,
His heart aching as he remembered its words,
That he once proudly sailed a decade ago.

As Nala stared at this sign,
And reflected on what the mother had shared,
He suddenly remembered a phrase,
From when Devi had shared her memory of home.

“The jewel that is Lanka,” he muttered over and over,
And it was as Nala reflected on Devi,
That he realized that his Eelam was Devi’s Lanka,
That she had been exiled from a home he never knew.

Nala, realizing Devi’s age, was certain,
She was exiled before Eelam was dreamt,
That she confused Eelam with Lanka,
Because she did not know such a path could exist.

Nala looked down in glee,
To see if maybe he could spot Devi’s shoulders,
To somehow translate to her that he knew,
Why the Goddess had brought them together.

But as Nala’s eyes drifted to meet Devi’s shoulder,
A small patch of the river revealed his reflection.
Where the boy that had just conversed with his mother,
Looked back at Nala teary-eyed.

Startled, Nala looked up to see,
If the boy hovered over him,
Only to find that the mother and her son,
Had long but left his side.

Nala, clenched his teeth,
Realizing that this memory could not be fought,
That he needed to obey the truth of his past,
Just as he obeyed the Goddess.

And so Nala decided to do,
What he did a decade ago for his home,
As he took one arm off the timber,
And pumped his fist in the air.

“We want justice!
We want it now!”

And it was as Nala and Devi began to chant,
That they witnessed the thousand lotuses begin to sink,
Only to then hear a familiar wave of cries,
Return to them in the distance.

For the thousand wails from before,
Flooded the river once again,
Each wail even more painful,
Than when Nala and Devi had heard it last.

The Pyre at the River's End

Chapter VI

As the final lotuses sank,
The waters of the river returned to their hips,
Her intruders now only families and pallbearers,
Though they no longer marched through a luscious green.

For the river's reflection had absorbed,
All that sailed in the crimson sky,
As the tigers and its leaves,
Painted her waves a fiendish red.

Nala and Devi, however,
Paid no attention to this change in hue,
Roaring alongside the families,
Fuelled by the anger from the cries they heard.

Every step ignited,
Every chant multiplied,
As their fury poured into every stride,
And every word performed by their body.

And as if threatened by their vigour,
That seemed to calm the helpless wails,
The thunder of Lanka's armies,
Returned in the distance to drown out their noise.

First returned their bullets,
Then their propellers,
And finally, to churn this ode to destruction,
Came their shells that silenced the thousand before.

But not even their explosions,
Could calm the protest that raged,
For the chants only became louder,
Upon hearing the escalating violence.

Nala and Devi stood tall,
Their strides united with the families,
Listening to the thousands,
That begged to be saved.

The two fought back their tears,
Knowing they needed to speak this pain aloud,
In hopes that its listeners,
Would rewrite the impending fate of their people.

Whether it be Canada, the Goddess,
Or any saviour willing to listen,
Their focus was on nothing more,
But ensuring their voiceless people would be heard.

And it was their focus on spreading their story,
That prevented the two from realizing the river's rise,
As her waters began to curl upwards,
Ascending like a stairway into the above.

For it was only when Nala and Devi,
Looked for a split second at their shores,
That the two realized that their march,
Was destined to take the sky.

The two would find their heads,
Flush with the snowy tip of the pines,
Looking below to see the asphalt shores,
Well beneath their feet.

As Nala and Devi marched up the curling highway,
The explosions from Lanka's armies continued to amplify.
Pulsing through their bodies,
Each wave whispering the futility of their march.

But every soul in the river,
Refused to be torn by this noise,
Each determined to do their part,
In Eelam's last stand.

Nala and Devi could feel every life,
That was lost as they trudged,
Both listening as many next to them,
Slowly lost their faith.

The further they both marched,
The less wails that they heard,
As thousands became hundreds,
As soon explosions outnumbered the wails.

Nala and Devi told themselves,
That those missing were surely proof.
Proof that thousands had somehow,
Escaped the final barrage.

But when they no longer heard the wails,
They knew to abandon their denial,
For a deafening silence consumed,
The river and its world.

No shells. No wails.
No chants. No whispers.
Only silence pervaded,
When it began to rain.

As the droplets fell, streaming down every cheek,
Every family began to sob along with the skies.
For they realized that their people,
Had not escaped the wrath of Lanka.

That their people lay massacred and lifeless,
In a home reduced to dust.
That the war of 26 years had come to a bloody end,
The promise of Eelam, now further than ever before.

Two generations mourned,
In that ascending river.
One that was raised in Eelam,
And another that should have.

But in that moment there was no difference,
Between the elders and their youth,
For they all mourned together,
The loss of their people, their home.

Nala then realized,
Why he had struggled to see this protest again,
For his body had never forgotten,
This pain that braced his body.

The world continued to tear,
Mourning for their loss.
As the rain washed away,
Any trace of the red that once engulfed it.

For the skies turned charcoal,
And the river's reflection resembled tar,
And the flags, stripped of why they sailed,
Flew solemnly in black.

Some waved these flags higher,
Some waving more aggressively than ever before,
While others left the black fabric to the river,
Deciding to hold one another instead.

Nala and Devi watched,
As the number of families diminished,
As one-by-one every family stood in place,
Each to mourn in their own way.

For it was not long before there was no one,
No man, woman, or child by their side,
As Nala and Devi were alone again,
Their only company the four silent pallbearers.

It was then that Nala and Devi,
No longer felt their feet marching upwards,
For the river had unexpectedly levelled off,
Amongst the charred sky.

The two looked around them baffled,
That their bodies brushed against clouds,
Only to then stumble over their feet,
As the four pallbearers had abruptly come to a stop.

The firmness of their posture,
Told Nala and Devi all that they needed to know,
That their path of escape lay ahead,
That the Goddess would soon reveal an answer.

Nala and Devi watched in awe,
As the river receded to their ankles,
And as if following in her descent,
The pallbearers too sank to their knees.

Nala and Devi, forced to follow in their fall,
Kneeled with the timber,
Feeling the palanquin press even further,
Into their shoulders.

And that was when they found the shroud,
Had lifted from their guides,
For they could finally see the identity,
Of the four, cryptic strangers.

But nothing could have prepared the two,
For what they would find,
As one look at their faces,
Would only further their confusion.

For these pallbearers, though their silhouettes,
Bore the outlines of humans,
Had eyes that were hollow,
Devoid of any life.

For their bodies that Devi had thought,
Shared the same dark complexion,
Were bodies carved and stitched,
Out of a foreign wood.

Nala watched as the wooden figures,
Turned and looked deeply into his eyes,
Each struggling as they tried,
To utter something to him.

“Eelam…” they both mumbled,
“Go to it,” as their faces crumbled.
As the two humans both watched,
As the four began to collapse.

Realizing that the palanquin,
Would surely crush them should they not let go,
The two pushed away from the timber,
And rolled safely to the river's edge.

For a moment, surprised,
That they had been given permission to let go,
The poles overwhelmed the wooden bodies,
As the pallbearers buckled beneath their mass.

Reducing their quilted bodies,
To patches of dry wood,
It was as if they had become a mound,
For their palanquin to rest.

But before Nala and Devi,
Could peer within, to satiate their curiousity,
The two were finally granted a line of sight,
Both smiling, seeing one another again.

Nala ran to Devi,
Embracing her in tears,
Both immediately trading stories,
Of all they had learned since they had parted.

How Devi's memory was of a library,
A library that had burned in Eelam.
How the protest was a memory,
A recital from Nala's youth.

How Devi's Lanka was Nala's Eelam,
And how Nala's Eelam was Devi's Lanka.
How the two shared this home,
And how it was surely why they were together.

But upon saying this aloud,
The two remembered their now fallen home,
That they had both found and lost the one thread,
That had strung their fates together.

It was then that Nala and Devi,
Both looked behind them in sorrow,
At the path that they had just coursed through,
To remind of a time when there was still hope.

But when they looked behind them,
They found the hope they thought they had lost,
For they found the thousands of families,
Sitting meditating in the river.

The families sat like lotuses,
Atop the river's waters,
Floating at the Goddess' will,
From where the protests began, to where they had ended.

Hope returned to Nala and Devi,
Realizing that the families did not forget,
As the river whispered to them their meditations,
Just as the hands of the worshippers from before.

As Nala and Devi listened,
And admired all the familiar faces,
Their admiration was cut short,
By the sound of thunder from behind.

Nala and Devi spun around,
To find the wooden mound submerged in flames,
As the fire, ignited by the wooden corpses,
Began to swallow the palanquin.

And it was then that the two put together,
The purpose of the pallbearers,
For their dismembered bodies,
Had become the ignition of a pyre.

The pyre remained blazing,
Despite the falling rain,
As the two realized in that moment,
They needed to gaze within the palanquin.

And so as Nala and Devi,
Stepped in front of the burning pyre,
To see what it was that they had been holding,
Nala would tremble at the familiar sight.

For within the palanquin was an object,
Encased in pristine glass.
The model that had swallowed Nala,
The one that had brought him to this world.

An almost exact replica,
Of what he first saw as a child,
The only discernible difference,
Was its garbhagriha and lack of coins at its foot.

This garbhagriha however,
Was what Devi's eyes immediately drew to,
For instead of the ornate sanctum,
There stood a building with three domes.

And as Devi realized another altar,
Was placed at the building's entrance,
She knew that this garbhagriha,
Was the library of her memories.

But this library was not charred,
As she had last seen it on that sign,
As every wall had been painted,
Adorned in white.

But as Devi watched the pyre,
Begin to engulf the model,
She felt a pain surge through her body,
Soon to rest in her mind.

For seeing this burning library,
Did what the gopuram had done for Nala,
For suddenly a rush of memories,
Filled the void that she longed to fill.



Devi finally knew,
The home that she yearned to remember,
Only to then hear a whisper within her,
To take a step towards the fire.

Nala tried to hold her back,
But Devi fought away from his grasp,
Turning to him with determined eyes,
That he had never seen on her face.

“I remember my home, Nala.
I remember it all because of these flames.
The Goddess compels me to walk into her fire,
For she waits to guide me back to Eelam.”

And it was then that Nala saw,
Time materialize before him,
As he watched decades pass over Devi,
As wrinkles formed over her face.

For her memories had aged her,
Three decades as she finally looked,
Just as how Nala had always,
Known her to be.

“Devi, if the Goddess,
Calls to you, so be it.
But are you certain,
That you wish to return to Eelam?”

“You know what has happened,
You know why we mourn,
Are you certain you can accept,
What you may find?”

“I do not know, Nala,
But Eelam is my home.
That is where I am from,
That is where I will find my thambi.”

“Please understand, Nala,
For this miniature is a sign,
That Eelam is ready for my return,
I must tend to its invitation.”

“For this miniature of the temple,
That is Yalpanam’s library,
She calls to me through its warmth,
Telling me my thambi waits within.”

“So let me, Nala,
Be one with its flames.
For it is time that I return.
For this exile to end.”

Nala listened to Devi,
Admiring the blaze that now possessed her eyes,
Realizing then that the model spoke,
Just as equally to him.

“Devi, this miniature,
Is what brought me to this world,
The model I thought foreshadowed,
A temple one day to come.”

”But as I hear you say it is your temple,
Seeing it superimposed into mine,
I question myself and wonder,
If the Goddess speaks to me through you.”

“That whether it be the worshippers,
The protestors, or this model,
That they have all been a sign,
That I must return to Eelam with you.”

“It all points to the crown,
That sits upon the lone tear,
To the home that lies desecrated,
To the home I pray we have not lost.”

“I have decided then, Devi,
Let us go together.
Let us go to Eelam.
Let us see what has become of our home.”

Devi leapt in joy,
Realizing that she and Nala were bound for the same path,
But most of all proud,
That the youth could finally embrace this home.

“Then take my hand, Nala,
Let us walk into the pyre,
For surely a path to Eelam,
Rests within these flames.”

And as Devi said these words,
Lighting struck in the distance,
But the two paid no mind,
As smoke ascended in the east.

Nala held onto Devi,
As she walked into the flames,
Its heat gently hugging their skin,
As they stepped onto the pyre.

Devi clutched the pearl around her neck,
As her other hand grazed the glass of the miniature,
As Nala took one last look at the families,
Sitting in the river in meditation.

And at this glance, the river began to tremble,
As if reminded her home was not amongst the clouds.
Her waves beginning to fall,
Taking Devi and Nala with her.

Our Sanctum is Our Library

Book III

Our Sanctum is Our Library

Book III

The sanctum or the *garbhagriha* is the womb of the Supreme's abode. It is where the *murti* lies and where its patrons come to realize the temple's truth.[25] It is the sanctuary where God and man's stories converge, as it is at its steps where one is revealed the truth of their temporal being. The sanctum is found at the end of one's cyclical procession, a destination where revelation is provided from above. The worshipper having learned the stories that make the divine manifest, sees the truth of the Supreme once they approach the steps of its inner sanctum. And so, when one has completed the length of their procession – finding their peoples' stories inscribed to their path – what truth do they ultimately find when they stare into the holy?

On June 1, 1981, the Jaffna/Yalpanam Public Library was set on fire by Sinhalese mobs and uniformed police.[26] Understood as a critical moment towards the war's beginning, this arson would "[shatter] Tamil adults and [radicalize] Tamil youth."[27] The Yalpanam Public Library was a symbol of Tamil culture and wisdom, and was considered to all as a sanctum, its loss only escalating fuming tensions.

25 Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple: Vol. I*, 161-165.

26 Knuth, *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries.* 80.

27 Ibid, 80.

Beginning as a private collection of the scholar K. M. Chellapha, the library would grow into a significant public collection on account of the collective effort of the Tamil community.[28] The collection would grow over decades, eventually requiring its own building, and in 1959, it would adopt its iconic white Indo-Saracenic facade. In 1981, the library held approximately 95,000 pieces of text, ranging from manuscripts on palm leaves to irreplaceable miniatures and archival text.[29] This structure was considered the library of the Tamil people, as Rebecca Knuth states "one could think of the [Yalpanam] Library as a national library even though a Tamil nation had not yet come into being."[30] Its architecture was intended to preserve the totality of Tamil history – built for the present, past and future generations of Tamils to come.

On May 31, 1981, following the shooting of three policemen in Yalpanam, Sinhalese paramilitaries began a pogrom that lasted for over three days. These riots would lead to the destruction of political offices, presses, businesses, and homes, but what would define this violence was the arson of the city's revered library.[31] The destruction of the building would lay the foundation for the war to come, as Knuth notes, "the attack convinced many of the reality of Sinhalese goals, the extinction of the Tamil culture and race in Sri Lanka."[32]

While repairs to the library would be conducted, it would be abandoned again at the commencement of the war, as the

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid, 81.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid, 82.

32 Ibid, 83.

building would fall victim to bullets and shelling, existing for the next 20 years as a fortress for rebels and the unhoused. The library however, would be reopened in 2003, as a part of a government effort towards building trust during that moment's brief ceasefire.[33] However, the reconstructed building provided little to remind of its arduous past. While conversations had been made towards potentially preserving its burnt ruins, the government would insist it be completely rebuilt and repainted in white.[34] Maryse Jayasuriya notes in their analysis: "It is possible that a casual observer on the street, in front of the gleaming building that has recreated the [Yalpanam] Public Library, would not know that this is the site of one of the crimes that triggered the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict."[35]

This erasure of history and how the conflict is remembered further extends to post-war Sri Lanka, as the children of the diaspora are left to reckon with the remnants of their protest. Memories are actively being rewritten by the victors across the island, to make clear that peace has been achieved and that the threat of the Tamils have been eliminated. Cemeteries, memorials, and monuments dedicated to the Eelam Tamil people are continually destroyed with the rationale that terrorists cannot be celebrated.[36] This complex relationship to memory can be seen across multiple scales, as strict regulations span the island on what is allowed and

33 Ibid, 86.

34 "History in Flames: Remembering the Burning of Jaffna Library." *Tamil Guardian*, May 31, 2021.

35 Maryse Jayasuriya. "Bricks, Mortar, Words: Memorializing Public Spaces Destroyed in the Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict." (South Asian Review 37, no. 3, 2016), 29.

36 McCargo, Duncan and Dishani Senaratne. "Victor's Memory: Sri Lanka's Post-War Memoryscape in Comparative Perspective, Conflict, Security & Development." (Conflict, Security & Development 20, no. 1, 2020),106-108.

forbidden to be erected. The Sri Lanka of today makes clear which side emerged victorious, while also sanitizing how that victory was achieved by the state. The Secretary of the Ministry of Tourism, George Michael, has stated the "LTTE and the violence which affected the public during the war should be forgotten," as the public image of the island promotes an erasure of why the war raged.[37] Artifacts of the LTTE and the genocide of the Tamil population have since become tourist sites to rejuvenate Sinhalese nationalism, as they both reaffirm Tamils as second-class citizens, as well as threats synonymous with the fallen rebels.[38]

In January 2021, a monument created by Jaffna/Yalpanam University students, dedicated to the massacre in Mullivaikal, was destroyed by the University after pressure from the state. After international backlash and protests from the Eelam Tamil diaspora, the monument was remade by the University, but not to the same design.[39] This memorial omitted the artillery shells found in the original design that depicted how the innocent were systematically murdered from above. As even the memorials that are given permission to be erected for the Tamils, are done so in accordance to the satisfaction of the watching majority.

These memory politics are further complicated by both the nationalism and ignorance of the public, as the island remains divided on how the population remembers the war's end. While one aisle of the island celebrates, the other

37 Hyndman, Jennifer, and Amaranth Amarasingam. "Touring "Terrorism": Landscapes of Memory in Post-War Sri Lanka." (Geography Compass, no. 8, 2014), 567-572.

38 Ibid, 567-572.

39 "Jaffna University to Investigate Reports That Mullivaikkal Monument May Be Removed Once More." *Tamil Guardian*, October 19, 2023.

mourns all that has been lost, as without meaningful steps towards accountability, the ignorance that led to the Civil War still exists in plain sight.

This can be seen in the 2022 *Aragalaya* protests that took the island by storm, as translated to struggle in Sinhalese, they formed in response to the economic mismanagement and corruption of the presiding government.[40] While these protests did lead to the resignation of the leadership – who still remain accused of committing war crimes during the war's end – during this moment of change, no effort was made by the majority to also address the myriad of issues that plagued the post-war Tamil community.[41] And when new leadership replaced the seats that the *Aragalaya* chased away, no change was felt by the Tamils as the status quo remained maintained.

A parallel to these protests can be made to the Eelam Tamil Mothers of the Disappeared, who in 2022 had marched for 2000 consecutive days.[42] Sri Lanka, notorious for "enforced disappearances" during the course of the war, still ranks amongst the highest in the world per Amnesty International, with an estimated 60,000 and 100,000 civilians having gone missing since the late-1980s.[43] The protests of the mothers still continues today, but has never received the

40 Tasnim Nazeer. "1 Year Later, Sri Lanka's Struggle Continues ." *The Diplomat*, July 12, 2023.

41 Samaranayake, Nilanthi, Nishan de Mel, and Ambika Satkunanathan. "A Year After Mass Protests, Sri Lanka's Governance Crisis Continues," *United States Institute of Peace*, July 20, 2023.

42 "The 2,000-Day Struggle by Tamil Mothers of the 'Disappeared.'" *Daily FT (Sri Lanka)*, August 17, 2022.

43 Jeevan Ravidran. "Families in Sri Lanka Yearn for Answers on Relatives Who Disappeared in Civil War." *Reuters*, November 2, 2022.

same attention and fervor as the *Aragalaya*.

The memories of the lost are buried or rewritten in Sri Lanka, as just as the library the nation wishes to paint over its history in white. The Yalpanam Public Library and the various architectures of remembering by Eelam Tamils are then each their own sanctums, each a repository that preserves the truth of their peoples' stories. But these stories are under attack and so too are their altars, and so when the second-generation peers into their sanctums, they are left to contend with their stories beginning to disappear.

THE SECOND SUNRISE

On that day
There was no wind
No rising tide,
Even the waves had died.
Sea.

Walking across
Feet sinking in the sand
Again a sunrise.

This time in the South.

What happened?
My town was burned;
My people became faceless;
In my land, my air
In everything,
The stamps of outsiders.

Hands clasped behind you,
Who did you wait for?
On the clouds
Fire
Has written its tale;
Who waits even now?

From the ashen streets,
Arise and march.

CHERAN RUDHRAMOORTHY
trans. Chelva Kanaganayakam

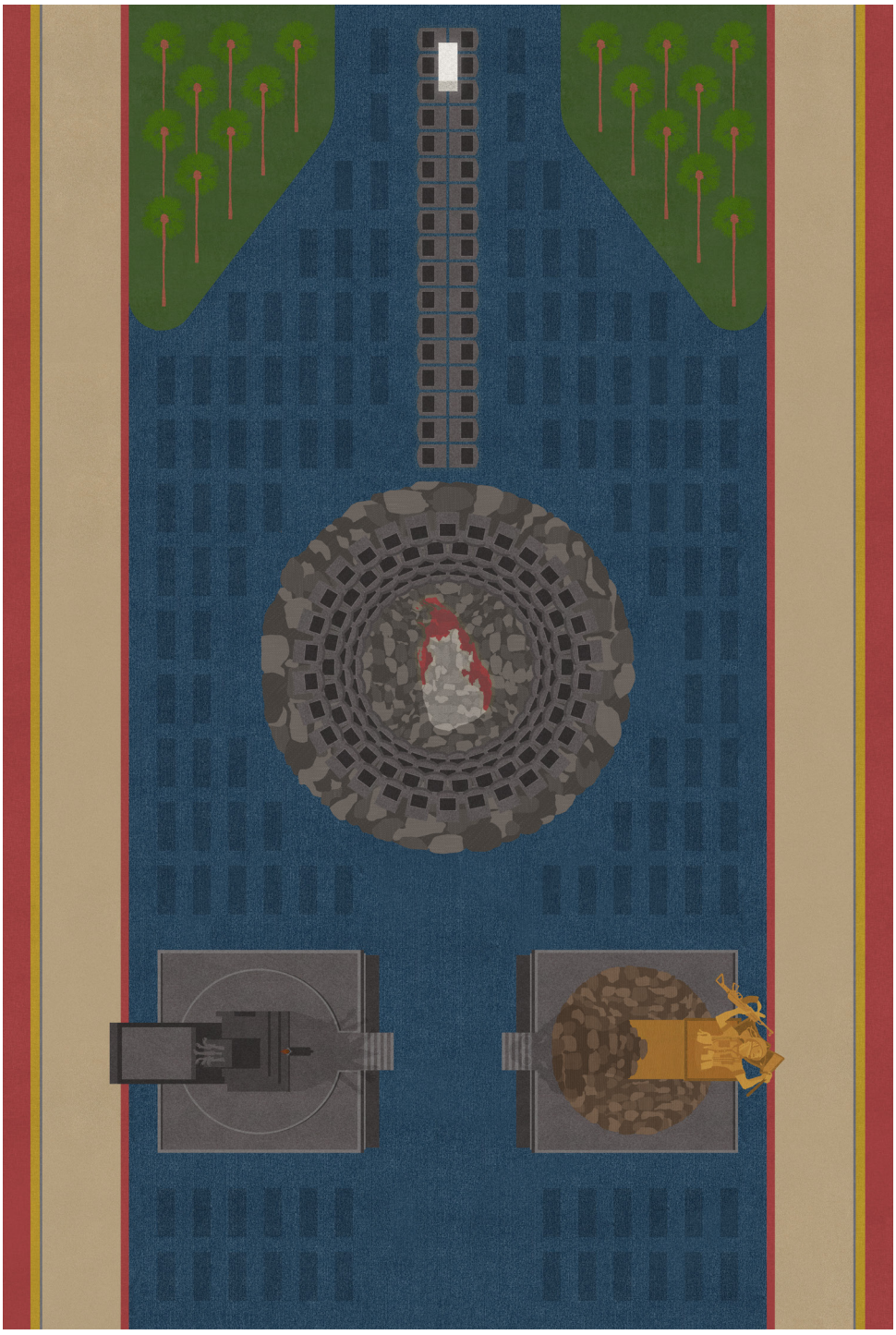


Fig. 15. Book III Frontispiece: *Our Sanctum is Our Library*

The Ferryman Awaits

Chapter I

A lone drop of rain,
Trickled down Devi's temple,
Settling above her brow,
Before streaming down her cheek.

A cooling sensation,
The drop spilled onto her chest,
Pooling above her pendant,
Sending chills to her waist.

Devi's eyes fluttered,
As the cold spread over her,
Wondering what had become,
Of the pyre and its warmth.

And as if to answer,
A salted mist sprayed over her,
Dowsing any hope,
Of the flames and their return.

Devi, now half-awake,
Pulled at her sari,
To hide beneath its cloth,
To return to her slumber.

But when she pulled at the fabric,
Her strength met with another's,
Glancing to her shoulder,
To find a friend beneath its ends.

Charmed by the youth,
That slept beneath her sari,
Devi lunged to embrace Nala,
To warm him from the cold.

But as she lunged forward,
Her body began to bob,
As she looked below to find,
Their legs sprawled atop a deck.

Devi raised her head,
The river's absence drawing worry,
Looking to her other shoulder,
To where she had felt the sprays of salt.

And upon seeing what lied before her,
Her eyes began to swell,
Discovering not a trace of land,
Remained within her sight.

For the backs of Devi and Nala,
Lay on the stern of a decrepit ship,
Sailing amidst the waves,
Of an endless, sapphire sea.

All Devi could remember,
Was leading Nala to the pyre,
And the weightlessness that followed,
Her fingers grazing the model's glass.

As where they were now,
Devi could not decipher,
And where their vessel was bound,
She was left to only pray.

Devi awoke Nala, to inform their new leg,
In hope that the youth was familiar with its waves.
But upon opening his eyes, his expression mirrored hers,
For he too was aghast at where their bodies lay.

The two searched the horizon,
That wrapped around their vessel,
But only emptiness pervaded,
Both the sea and its sky.

For nothing beyond their boat,
Sailed atop her mystic waters,
And her sky, raining grey,
Housed not a single cloud.

Devi, defeated,
Having met yet another riddle,
Looked again to the waves,
In search of any clue.

And it was as she watched the dunes,
Gallop amidst the sea,
That she heard a paddle swish,
Gently pushing against its sway.

Devi gestured to Nala,
To shift his eyes towards the bow,
To where the sound of a battle,
Had been pit against the dunes.

And at this gesture, the world revealed,
A pale, elderly man,
His head shaven, body hunched,
Digging his oar into the waves.

The two were certain,
That he was just as those before,
That their future lied under the direction,
Of another silent guide.

But it was at this thought that the elder,
As if sensing his will questioned,
Placed his oar into its crutch,
And walked over to them both.

“Welcome, children, to my vessel,
I am pleased to see you awake.
I found you floating amongst this sea,
And have since worried I was too late."

"I am the ferryman, where you desire,
Trust my vessel can take.
All I ask is that you warm my heart,
Tell me why this sea's your fate."

"For this ferryman does not row for strangers,
Only for the acquainted,
So recite to me your story,
And I will take you wherever you wish."

Devi looked to Nala,
With a smile across her cheeks,
As they both thanked the Goddess,
For granting an escort willing to listen.

"Thank you, aiyya, for boarding us,
Our lives are in your debt.
I am Devi, this is Nala,
And we both head for home."

The two then told their story,
From the asokavana to the pyre,
Speaking of where they had begun,
And where they dreamt to go.

"We both look to Eelam,
The crown atop Lanka.
Tell us, O dear ferryman,
Have we been washed further from her shores?"

The ferryman began to chuckle.
“It seems you were both correct.
That the Goddess has a plan,
And does indeed forge your fate.

Devi, Nala, won’t you come,
To the bow of this vessel,
And I will show you why it is,
That I laugh at what you ask.”

The two walked with the ferryman,
Standing together at the bow’s edge,
Admiring the sea ahead,
Where the sky was no longer bare.

“Devi, Nala,
Do you see, the smoke that rises ahead?
Where the sky appears to burn?
Where the sea appears to cease?”

“That trail, my children,
Is a marker set to Eelam,
For that is where we now head,
And in three days, we meet her shores.”

Devi embraced Nala,
And pointed towards the smoke.
“Look, Nala, our home,
We finally follow its course.”

“The home that we were robbed of,
It is finally within sight.
My exile nears its end,
I can feel my thambi within reach.”

But Nala did not rejoice,
Nor did he reply,
For taken ahold had uncertainty,
Whether this land was his home.

For Nala could not fathom,
The land that sprawled ahead,
As his eyes latched to Eelam’s smoke,
Tracing her fumes to Swarga’s edge.

But before the youth could fixate,
On why smoke was his land’s marker,
Nala was drawn away,
By the touch of the ferryman.

“Forgive me,
For there is one last note that I must make,
That you were not alone,
When I found you in this sea.”

“For you both clutched an object,
While being carried by her waves,
And upon learning of your story,
I know it is not to be ignored.”

“Take it, my children,
For I am certain it will be of help,
But even if it is not,
I insist. Do not let it go.”

The ferryman then held an object,
Stored beneath his seat,
Placing it between the three,
His guests shaken at its sight.

For before them was the miniature,
That had begun Nala’s journey,
The miniature that had brought,
Devi and Nala to this sea.

Despite being tossed,
In the same waves as the two,
The miniature showed no sign,
Of its perfection having diminished.

The glass that encased it,
Remained devoid of any chips,
And not a single dew of water,
Had slithered through its slit.

The undisturbed model,
Looked just as in the pyre,
A collision of two temples,
A collision of its two patrons.

The ferryman then looked to Nala,
And pointed to the sanctum,
Both his guests unaware,
That a test had just begun.

“Do you know, child,
Of the story of the altar in this model?
For it is a story that summons tears,
To even the coldest of this world.”

But before Nala could answer,
Devi interjected,
Kneeling before the model,
Putting her palm against its glass.

“The tale of Yalpanam’s library,
Is one I closely know,
For it is the temple that I was raised,
To call my second home.”

“I apologize for interrupting,
But I have longed to tell this tale,
For these memories that have returned,
They beg me to be shared.”

“Take a seat, won’t you, aiyya,
And listen well, won’t you, Nala,
For I will tell you of this palace,
And how its queen sent me to this world.”

My Temple Burns

Chapter II

"The library of Yalpanam,
Took many forms before my time,
Taking decades for it to become,
As this miniature now describes."

"Too young to have witnessed,
These many incarnations,
As a child I would imagine,
As my appa retold its past."

"He would place me on his lap,
And tell me of Chellapha,
The man who sowed the seeds,
That would bloom into this place."

"For aiyya had dreamt a library,
Tamil and free to all,
Its shelves, an archive,
For the children yet to come."

"Appa would tell me,
Of the many that shared his vision,
How their persistence grew a collection,
Outgrowing every room that dared contain it."

“For it was not long before the stories,
Demanded a home to call their own,
One that was not borrowed,
A symbol of the legacy it protected.”

“And so after three decades,
Came the walls beneath this glass,
As the library of three domes,
Was erected for the world.”

“Appa told this tale,
Every year without fail,
Ending with its unveiling,
To remind how its life weaved with mine.”

“For the eve that its doors,
Were opened to our soil,
Appa would be absent,
Cradling his newborn in his arms.”

“My eyes first met its stone,
At half a decade old,
My fingers interlocked with appa’s,
As he walked me through its gates.”

“As I stood at the compound’s helm,
Watching appa swoon at the library,
My eyes became entangled,
By the garden before its feet.”

“The garden engulfed all,
That the library did not claim,
Kissing the walls that enclosed its borders,
Brushing the waists of its guests.”

“Blossoms bloomed in excess,
While palmyras wafted the clouds,
Stolen it had Bhudevi,
Spreading her beauty across its grounds.”

“And excavated from this blanket,
Was the path we now began,
Its earth guiding us both,
To the veranda that hid its doors.”

“But my stare had become fixed,
On where this path split in two,
Where the trail’s opposing palms,
Had sculpted an island of green.”

“This swath, a perfect circle,
With concentric rings in bloom,
Aligned to the building’s axis,
As if an extension of its facade.”

“But my heart was not weakened,
By the floral ripples that split my path,
But by a parasol at its centre,
Where a guardian patiently sat.”

“Held afloat by four columns,
The parasol shaded a marble figure,
Legs crossed within a lotus,
A veena resting upon Her lap.”

“Draped over Her, a cream sari,
Adorned with fresh roses,
Her stone eyes locked with mine,
As She strummed the universe’s tune.”

“My eyes were at once captured,
By this figure as pale as milk,
My pupils cradled in Hers,
As I swam within her warmth.”

“She, the Goddess of words,
The guardian of the learned,
At the helm of this palace,
I, Her student, could not resist.”

“It was told that every child,
Shared a bond with the Goddess,
That Her strums weaved a charm,
Protecting our future, our past.”

“And it was as I stood frozen,
That appa took my hand,
Marching to a path hidden,
That circled Her marble throne.”

“I first felt the domes above,
Performing this pradakshina.
The trio staring below,
As the Goddess returned my eyes.”

“Appa had once told,
That he would often mistaken the domes,
As gopurams that told distant travellers,
That the holy lies ahead.”

“And so as we completed our third cycle,
Pressing our palms before the Goddess,
I gazed upwards to put an image,
To the sibling I longed to meet.”

“All it took was a glance,
To feel her warmth again,
Her strength pooling into its doors,
As I longed to march its halls.”

“Its facade, the same white,
That painted Her cheeks supple,
Was adorned in the ornament,
Of a now distant, broken empire.”

“Two rows of inset windows,
Gave glimpses of its jewels,
But the shadows of its domes,
Ensured only patrons could read its truth.”

“Its warmth enveloped all,
carrying the love of a hundred mothers,
My soul drawing within,
Just as it had with its protector.”

“Appa, familiar,
With the glow that lit my face,
Cupped my cheek with a smile,
Before walking me to its doors.”

“But as we entered the veranda,
And began to scale its steps,
Appa pointed below,
Just as he would at any temple.”

“Unbuckling both our sandals,
We placed them before the doors,
And as we walked into its halls,
Appa introduced me to its keepers.”

“Years turned into decades,
As time endowed a daily routine,
For each day I would seek the Goddess,
Before marching to her doors.”

“What began as visits with appa,
Became a tradition alone,
As I would seek our beloved guardian,
Before racing for Her shelves.”

“My friends became Her keepers,
From groundsmen to librarians,
And with time, I claimed a table,
That they too knew as mine.”

“Overlooking Her marble throne,
On the second floor in the eastern wing,
I would tuck my chest against its edge,
Over stories of every kind.”

“This hunger to read would grow,
With every passing year,
But its collection of ninety thousand,
Never left me feeling empty.”

“Whether printed on plain paper,
Or inscribed on palm leaves,
From the colonial to the ancient past,
Our people’s history fed my needs.”

“And then a decade after,
My first visit to this shrine,
I was also given a friend,
One that shared my blood, and one day my table.”

“Thambi first sat across from me,
At half a decade old,
Reading the very words,
That first told me I would return.”

“Much, however, was rumbling,
Across our island nation,
As decades of frustration,
With neglect, had turned sour.”

“But appa would not allow us,
To be shaken by what stirred,
As he reminded us each night,
Where our minds should instead lie.”

““Do not concede,” he would tell us,
“Your love to learn shall prevail,”
Certain that no harm,
Would befall the library or the learned.”

“For the Goddess kept us safe,
She would not allow Her temple to fall,
And so upon his words,
We paid no mind to such concerns.”

“But what we did not know,
Was appa thought different,
And was sparing us of the anger,
That flooded his limp heart.”

“He never told of the many scuffles,
Or the chants that he would begin,
His voice fierce, never trembling,
For the future of his kin.”

“Appa spoke of the library,
As a haven for us both,
Gambling that no one dared,
To smear Her walls in blood.”

“Moreover, Appa knew,
That these shelves steered our fate,
That should his chants fail,
It could pave his children a second chance.”

“And so I ignored for years,
The whispers-turned-screams,
Looking past the dried blood,
That stained our empty streets.”

“Each day we would return,
To the library, our table.
Each day charting a path,
Where we were hidden from the world.”

“With our eyes glued to the domes,
Steady to its white,
We were careful not to stumble,
On what laid at our toes.”

“But all changed when news arrived,
Of a demonstration gone wrong,
And when appa did not return that evening,
Our ignorance was tested.”

“A time of hopeful denial,
I thought any day he would return,
Discarding any theory,
That his body was no more.”

“It was then that the first murmurs,
Of Eelam began to spread.
But again, I paid no mind,
Following instead my appa’s words.”

“And so we continued our trips,
The library, our fortress,
But now we heard the screams,
The mobs coming closer.”

“I asked thambi what he thought,
Of a future where we left,
To a place where we were not deemed,
Unworthy to exist.”

“But thambi was adamant,
To abandon our land was to abandon Appa,
Dreaming of a day,
When we would unite at our table.”

“And so we did not leave,
Staying true to our convictions,
But no longer reading to please,
I instead read to distract.”

“The days became longer,
The news, ever gruesome,
As thambi and I did all we could,
To be convinced that we were safe.”

“But, you see, aiyya and Nala,
Only for so long can you avoid the truth,
For if you decide to test fate’s courtesy,
One day she will no longer knock.”

“For the evening of the memory,
That I have obsessed over in this world,
Was the very evening that I watched,
As my precious temple burned.”

“It all began after thambi,
Showed me his pearl pendant,
As we both began to traverse,
The hidden path that led home.”

“Night had consumed day,
And it was while standing before our door,
That thambi began to wail,
Realizing what was absent from his neck.”

“Begging to go back,
He told he knew that it was foolish,
But there was something about this pendant,
That had made him feel safe.”

“And as I thought to how little,
I could grant him in this lifetime,
I decided to return alone,
To find his missing jewel.”

“Thambi was certain,
That it still lay upon our table,
And as a friend of its keepers,
I knew where lied a spare key.”

“Kissing my thambi for the last time,
I advised he lock our doors shut,
As I walked into the wilderness,
That hid our way home.”

“It only took a moment,
To hear the echoes of that to come,
For at first I thought it a rally,
For the election days away.”

“But while looking to the moon above,
Swamped by trails of fumes,
I saw a glow ahead,
As if Swarga beckoned me home.”

“I crept towards the warmth,
To find the light’s source,
But upon parting the last shrub,
I found my city wrought in flames.”

“Homes set alight,
Shops melting as if wax,
My people ran, not from the fire,
But from the caravans feeding the flames.”

“I watched them pick their prey,
Laughing while battering bodies,
Leaving my neighbours mangled,
To be consumed by our blazing streets.”

“And for a moment, I saw appa,
Bleeding out on the street’s edge,
Only to realize this was a stranger.
A face I could have known.”

“And it was as I remembered appa,
That I knew I could not stay,
And so, bowing my head, I ran,
Sighing in relief as I saw the library.”

“The front gates had been left open,
And so too had its doors,
A sign, I thought, that the mobs,
Could not fathom to incite such arson.”

“Or perhaps they had been banished,
By the protector of this compound,
As I smiled at the Goddess,
Unaware we had lost this game of dice.”

“Taking the side stairs,
I rushed to our worn table,
And atop the words of a Prince chasing a fawn,
Was the jewel my thambi sought.”

“And it was as I held the pendant,
Admiring the brilliance of its shine,
That I heard the voices that took the streets,
Roar from the halls beyond.”

“I took a step back in panic,
Feeling a warmth graze my knees,
And when the door began to creak open,
I crouched beneath the table with the pendant.”

“I watched as a pair of ankles,
Walked into the room,
And with each step he took,
I held my breath, praying he not bend down.”

“All that I could discern,
Was that the stranger still wore his slippers,
His soles stained in my people’s blood,
Each step smearing our pain.”

“The stranger marched around the room,
Brushing every wall, every shelf,
Before running abruptly for the exit,
And descending down the stairs.”

“It was only when I heard the door shut,
That I crawled back to my feet,
Only to realize that appa deceived us,
For the room was engulfed in flames.”

“Running to the nearest window,
I watched a caravan trample the garden,
None cared to mask their faces,
As they sprinted towards the gates.”

“I recognized some as faces,
That once would exchange smiles,
But it was the ones that donned their uniform,
That told this arson would not be the last.”

“And it was as I continued this stare,
That a man turned back for a glance,
As I knew at once the way that he stood.
Familiar with the blood beneath his slippers.”

“The man stared at my library,
His eyes beaming as would a mad god’s,
Proud to have brought an early sunrise,
For those who could not wait until morning.”

“I put the pendant around my neck,
Taking with me as much as I could.
As I ran out of my temple for the last time,
Just as the flames took hold.”

“And it was then that I saw the Goddess,
Her marble body searing in flames.
Her parasol broken, her skin charred black,
As if Kali had conquered her throne.”

“And it was as I stood before her,
That my knees fell to her feet.
Spilling all that I had recovered,
Witnessing finally the extent of the crime.”

“The flames of Yalpanam rose in the distance,
And so too now did her library.
But in that moment of loss, all I could cry,
Was why did appa leave us alone?”

“Just as when the miniature,
Had sat atop the river’s pyre,
My temple was consumed by an aura of red,
Though my walls had begun to crumble.”

“It was at this sight, that without hesitation,
Still on my knees, now in tears,
I began to perform a pradakshina,
Circling her throne with what hope remained.”

“All that I wished for was that my thambi,
And the children of all my people,
Have a temple that would nurture them,
To teach them who they were.”

“And so I closed my eyes, asking the Goddess.
To fulfill Her divine duty.
That She protect Her children from losing their past,
And a future where they were nothing.”

“But you see, before I could plead,
And face Her for the third time,
I fainted from the smoke that had taken Yalpanam,
Only to then awake to this world's bidding.”

“Aiyya, I am certain, that my temple did not fall.
For this model is surely a sign.
For it seems, aiyya, you know more than you tell,
If these walls stand, then towards it we must go.”

“For the Goddess and my thambi await me there,
Do not deny what my heart beckons.
I have longed for this home for far too long,
Take me to where I belong.”

At these words, the rain began to recede,
As the ferryman bowed his head.
His test had been passed, and it was now time,
That he delivered the victors their prize.

“I do know your library,
And I assure you it still stands,
But first, Devi and Nala,
There is something I must share.”

“I sensed such a truth,
When I first found you both,
But now I am certain,
Why we have met.”

“I will take you there, Devi, but first, I believe,
It is proper I reveal who I am.
For I have waited decades for you both to arrive,
To join me in sailing this sea.”

The ferryman stood up,
As a tail unfurled,
Its end dipped,
A charcoal grey.

“Forgive me, children, for decades ago,
I chose to conceal who I am to the world,
But your tale, Devi, tells me that a promise,
Has come time to be upheld.”

“For I am the son of Vayu.
The loyal servant of Rama.
I am Hanuman, the fabled vanara of Kishkinda.
I gave my word that I would take you home.”

The Vanara's Tale

Chapter III

Pressing their palms together,
The two prostrated before Hanuman.
And with His hands hovering atop them,
The vanara imparted His divine blessing.

On their knees, they sat struck,
At their ferryman, no longer frail.
For His body had born anew,
Shed away had His disguise.

Standing before them regal,
The vanara's youth had conquered age.
Fields of gold combed over His skin,
A coconut's half, His lips bulged.

Devi and Nala watched,
As the warrior drew His oar.
Placing the shaft upon His shoulder,
Summoning His fabled mace.

Nala did not allow,
His stare to meet the vanara's.
For his courage was overtook,
By the glow of the Lord's reveal.

But Devi, her heart strung,
To the smoke that rose ahead,
Was bound by no restraint,
For this miracle was bound for another.

“Lord, for what reason,
Do you serve as our guide?
Why head for Eelam,
If not for our plea?”

“It is an honour to receive you,
But a daze sweeps my mind,
Why sail these wretched waters?
Is your escort a fixture of fate?”

Hanuman knelt to Devi,
Placing His palm to her cheek.
As He raised His two children,
Smiling as Nala’s pupils met with His.

“Devi, in due time,
I will ease you of your worry.
For such answers inquire more,
To fathom the truth is to reveal all.”

“So sit, will you not, children,
As I recite as you did for me.
Of this vanara’s tale, and the promise He made,
That has compelled Him this hour to speak.”

“A millennia of voyages,
I and these waters have shared.
But fondly, I remember the first,
That spelled the many to come.”

“For it was a quest for dear Rama,
That your guide was first obliged,
A taste of this sea’s mist,
The dew that settles upon our tongues.”

“As now recited as legend,
Sung by lands near and far,
I begin this tale, fulfilling a promise,
In search for Sita’s prison.”

“From shores no far from here,
Is where I listened with dear Angada.
As a wise eagle told,
That Rama’s love withered in Lanka.”

“At these words, my body grew,
To rival the looming Mahendra.
As I pounced from her summit,
Scaling this sea in three leaps.”

“Upon arriving in Lanka,
My hair stood on its ends,
For a poison riddled the land,
And a deceptive beauty masked its rot.”

“And so when I found Sita,
Tormented, beneath an asokavana,
I begged She take my hand,
But She refused to accept Her fortune.”

“My Queen, holding back Her tears,
Told only Her King could grant Her release.
And so I leapt to Rama,
To inform His next feat.”

“But first I delivered a message,
And at the price of a charred tail,
I told Her warden of the doom to come,
And in my escape, set His city ablaze.”

“When I returned to Bharat’s shores,
A fierce battle loomed ahead.
For in great speed, an army rose,
United, ready for the siege.”

“And it was then that I first met Him.
The just sibling of Lanka’s king.
For Vibheeshana had defected,
To join our righteous campaign.”

“Hope surged through each of us,
At the strength of our numbers,
Only for it to waver,
When our legion met this sea.”

"As gazing into the horizon,
It was clear that only I,
Held the divine gift,
To traverse her ocean's length."

"And so with Kubera's promise,
That his waters would obey,
Built was a holy bridge to Lanka,
A feat surely, Nala, you know."

"At her shores, welcomed by night,
We each arrived unaware,
How soon we would be tested,
By the breadth of Lanka's bile."

"Her beauty fell to the blood,
Of the pillaged and the stolen.
Our knees trekking across a land,
Irrigated by Yama's touch."

"For when the sun arose,
The great battle commenced.
And her land and its mirage,
Dissolved to our roars."

"For, you see, with Rama at our helm,
Never did we doubt our service as duty.
For this march was led by justice's reins.
It was written that light would prevail."

“And so, a tale as old as time,
Good vanquished the ploys of evil.
As Ravana fell to the might of our King,
And our Lord returned to His love.”

“But left unwritten were the tales,
Following His seventh leave.
For without our Rama, Vibheeshana and I learned,
That our adventures had only begun.”

“The successor to Lanka’s vacated throne,
The asura bestowed His home my second,
As together we nursed her of her wounds,
Healing her of His brother’s poison.”

“I remember still, our aimless strolls,
Beneath the jungles that shaded Kishkinda.
And in a few leaps, our smiles would resume,
Amidst the winding streets of Lanka.”

“For centuries, it was just I and Him,
These two homes we would treat as one,
For although I was not birthed to her land,
Just as you, I belong to Lanka.”

“Millennia though would pass,
And tales of your people told our time was near.
As our aging kingdoms, with no will to fight,
Turned to hide from the conquests to come.”

“From the hills we watched your people fall,
Reaping all their hunger desired.
As empires rose, as soon as they fell,
Each victim to a lust for power.”

“Lanka took a plethora of names,
And I have bore witness to these supposed faces,
But whether Serendib, Lanka, or Ceylon,
Who she is cannot be sculpted by her victor.

“Each empire imposed their strength to change her,
But wound her was all they did.
As each battle forgone, drenched her in venom,
Seeping into cracks once sealed.”

“So you see, my children, when Eelam’s struggle began,
We thought we had witnessed the worst.
But as the destruction began, we realized our fault,
For the ages of bile had begun to spill over.”

“Vibheeshana and I knew,
That our strength could not meddle.
That the fate of humans,
Was a curse for them alone.”

“But as the signs became clear,
Of the pyres soon to come,
We intervened in your affairs,
Knowing fate would not allow.”

“But, you see, for every life,
That we had both scrambled to save,
Each was taken at once,
By the words written in fate's strings.”

“And so left we were,
To watch your people, abandoned,
As terror shadowed their land,
Soon to ravage. Soon to erase.”

“We listened from the hills,
To the chants of your people.
To words meant for leaders,
That heard with deaf ears.”

“We listened to your people,
Their midnight tribunals,
As a great many, in fear,
Chose to leave in grief.”

“And of those that stayed,
Many embraced the futility,
Trading in their voices,
In order to bear arms.”

“As the stage was then set,
For the dance yet to come,
As Yama inched closer,
To His endless parade.”

“Still I cannot recall, when it all began,
Which riot was truly the first.
But Lanka in time, was a pyre unlit,
The corpses of the loved, their dreams, left scattered.”

“For this jewel, once refined,
Was robbed of her beauty.
Reduced to but a tear.
A drop stranded to the sea.”

“I tell you this all to begin,
My wayward answer to you, Devi,
To why this vessel’s course,
Is bound only for Lanka.”

“For you see, it was during,
This time of great turmoil,
That the Goddess pried me away,
From Yama’s potent grip.”

“But to relay that tale,
I must speak first of your temple.
For the flames of Yalpanam’s library,
Weaves too into these words.”

“For Vibheeshana and I both,
Were patrons of its walls,
But it was He that saw first,
A temple had been erected.”

““For the Tamil people,” He claimed.
“A national library stands tall.”
For even then, the seeds of Eelam,
Had been sown, yet to sprout.”

“And taken by this struggle,
He parted from the hills,
To live a life, disguised,
Amongst your hurting people.”

“For while fate did not allow,
That He fight within your trenches,
His chants spread the land,
Surely in unison with your kin.”

“For the asura, once more,
Had defected for the just.
But uncertain we both were,
If light would again prevail.”

“And so with great regret, Devi,
Do I tell you that I remember,
The dawn that swept you away,
Stranding you in this world.”

“Finding Yalpanam in ruin,
Left inconsolable we were,
Only to embrace defeat,
At the fate of your holy temple.”

“For the garden, the domes,
The Goddess, her fortress,
Had all each been eaten,
By the shadows of flames.”

“For the venom made clear,
Nothing would be spared.
Foretelling the devastation,
That was yet to still unravel.”

“But the day of my rescue,
Came well after this crime,
When the war had begun,
Its first of many phases.”

“As while leaping to Lanka,
Unaware of that below,
I chose an unruly course,
That would seal a ferryman’s fate.”

“For you see, too late,
Did I realize in my leap,
That the land that I crossed,
Was embroiled in fierce battle.”

“For my right leg was shot,
By both sides below.
As each deemed me a shell,
Launched by the other.”

“At first I brushed away,
The pain that I soon felt.
For such weapons, I thought certain,
My body was immune.”

“But forget I did the poison,
That had simmered for an age,
For spread it had, now coursing,
Through the triggers of both sides.”

“For the moment I was struck,
By the twin flames below,
A paralyzing pain,
Surged through my body.”

“My body began to descend,
Head first into the fire.
For this traveller had been shot,
By humanity and her astra.”

“I landed in a bunker,
Where countless lay dead,
For life had abandoned.
Each body left to rot.”

“I then heard a scream,
A woman standing over a body,
Shrieking, on her knees,
Trying to awaken the lost.”

“I gazed at my feet,
To find them mangled, disfigured,
Knowing my next leap,
Would surely be my last.”

“For with what power remained,
That Vayu had endowed,
I leapt for the skies,
Your temple, my course.”

“I screamed for Vibheeshana,
Knowing the asura rested within,
For His grief had proclaimed,
The ashed temple His new home.”

“As He ran from the ruins,
To receive my last breath,
I begged He relieve me,
Of the pain now in my veins.”

“And Vibheeshana, in response,
As if instructed by the Gods,
Took me in His arms,
And circled the black Goddess.”

“My eyes began to drift,
As He held me in His arms,
The world fading, as if to match,
The temple and its complexion.”

"But as His eyes met with Hers,
For the third and last time,
A voice began to speak,
Swelling from within."

""O Hanuman, worry not,
Your time is not now.
But to save you, I must request,
You complete for me a task."

"For come will a day,
When the library's children will return,
And I ask that you wait,
And guide them through its sea."

"For heal you I will,
Of the pain that you endure,
On the condition that you serve,
As a ferryman for my children."

"Accept and I will grant,
You the power to quell the seas.
But take I must your leap,
Until you have brought my children home.""

"Prostrating before Her,
I graciously accepted.
As the Goddess opened Her eyes,
Her milky glance restoring all."

“And that is why I am a ferryman,
For I guide the stranded home.
As for decades, I have served the lost,
You, my children, my reason why.”

“For in three days, we meet Eelam,
Where my duty will be completed,
And there you will meet Vibheeshana,
Who will chart your temple’s way.”

With her palms still against the miniature,
Devi looked at the library in awe.
As Hanuman raised her to her feet,
And embraced Devi in His arms.

“I know you must wonder,
What has become of your temple,
So know, it has lived,
Many lives after its fate.”

“From a fortress for rebels,
To a refuge for the unhoused,
Your temple was a beacon,
That adapted for your people.”

“But what I must note,
From the last that I was there,
Is your temple has since adopted,
A new form I have since questioned.”

“For its shelves had been lined,
And its domes had been restored,
But painted white have been its scars,
Lost has any trace of its many wounds.”

Devi with her eyes wide,
Rested frozen against His chest,
As Nala sat alone,
His eyes taken by the smoke.

For the youth sat drawn,
To a temple he had never seen,
As its stories, never read,
Felt vivid, almost familiar.

And as Nala sunk in wonder,
His mind gazing towards Eelam,
A fog began to settle,
Descending from its horizon.

And when this haze took the vessel,
And all became white,
A clunk was heard ahead,
Rippling at the hull.

Stepping towards the noise,
Devi lunged from the vessel’s edge,
As she reached into the sea,
Recklessly dipping her hand.

And with both hands she held,
A strange fragment retrieved.
For the waves had just conjured,
An arm made of clay.

Our Stone is Forever

Chapter IV

An arm outstretched,
Fingers contorted, tips broken,
Each member uneven,
Covered in the prints of another.

Devi caressed its grooves,
Pressing her own against its divots,
As Nala watched in wonder,
While worry flushed their guide.

But before the two could question,
The concern that took His face,
A clunk was heard again,
One now in Nala's reach.

As the youth dug the sea,
For what arrived to form a pair,
He stumbled on no twin,
Its clay without fingers.

For this fragment, a mud canister,
Ballooned, then converged,
As a clay shell had been boarded,
The missile eroding in his arms.

Devi and Nala placed,
The two fragments by the model.
Their clay imprints the same,
A shared creation by one maker.

But before they could unravel,
The riddle that tied their treasures,
A shadow enveloped their vessel,
As a path parted amidst the fog.

Returning to His disguise,
As if aware of what approached,
Hanuman ushered His guests,
To crouch before His feet.

As Devi and Nala puzzled,
By the events that now unfolded,
Sat lost in the clay's cipher,
As its maker steered them home.

"Who goes there? State your business.
Know you sail on forbidden waters.
Show yourself, for if not,
We will shoot without restraint."

And as if threatened by the voice,
The fog scattered from its direction,
Where, at guard, two men stood,
Atop a dock, their shore shrouded.

Both pointing to Hanuman,
Waving that He approach,
His children peered discreetly,
As forward, the vanara rowed.

For dressed in tan uniforms,
A rifle over their shoulders,
Muscles toned, boots shined,
The men glared as He approached.

Both identical in every regard,
Were they compared below the chin,
As only one stroked their beard,
Before stepping forward, rifle pointed.

“Who are you, old man?
Tell us swiftly or I will shoot.
Do not think that I will waver,
I offer you no pity.”

“For all it takes is a bullet,
To puncture your worn deck,
Stay silent, and with joy,
I will feed you to the waves.”

Hanuman, halting His vessel,
A safe distance to conceal His guests,
Answered with the patience,
Of one familiar with such rage.

“I am, but a lowly ferryman,
Believe, you must, that I mean no harm.
For days ago, the mist stole my bearings,
Only to be returned at your call.”

“I have nothing to hide, child,
My only course is set for home.
Release me from your crosshairs,
And never again will our paths cross.”

“Leave him be, brother.”
Replied the guard, yet to approach.
“This hermit is not a threat,
Do not waste your time with him.”

And as the guard began to lecture,
To save his hunger to kill,
The remaining fog cleared the shore,
Revealing the shadow’s host.

For a slender block of stone,
Pierced the sky with ebony,
Its black, but only a backdrop,
For what rested beneath its shadow.

For a plinth lied at its feet,
Chiseled from the same stone.
Atop a stepped platform,
Wielding a swathe of sea.

And within this confined pool,
Extended scorched limbs.
Nine arms outstretched,
Fingers contorted, tips broken.

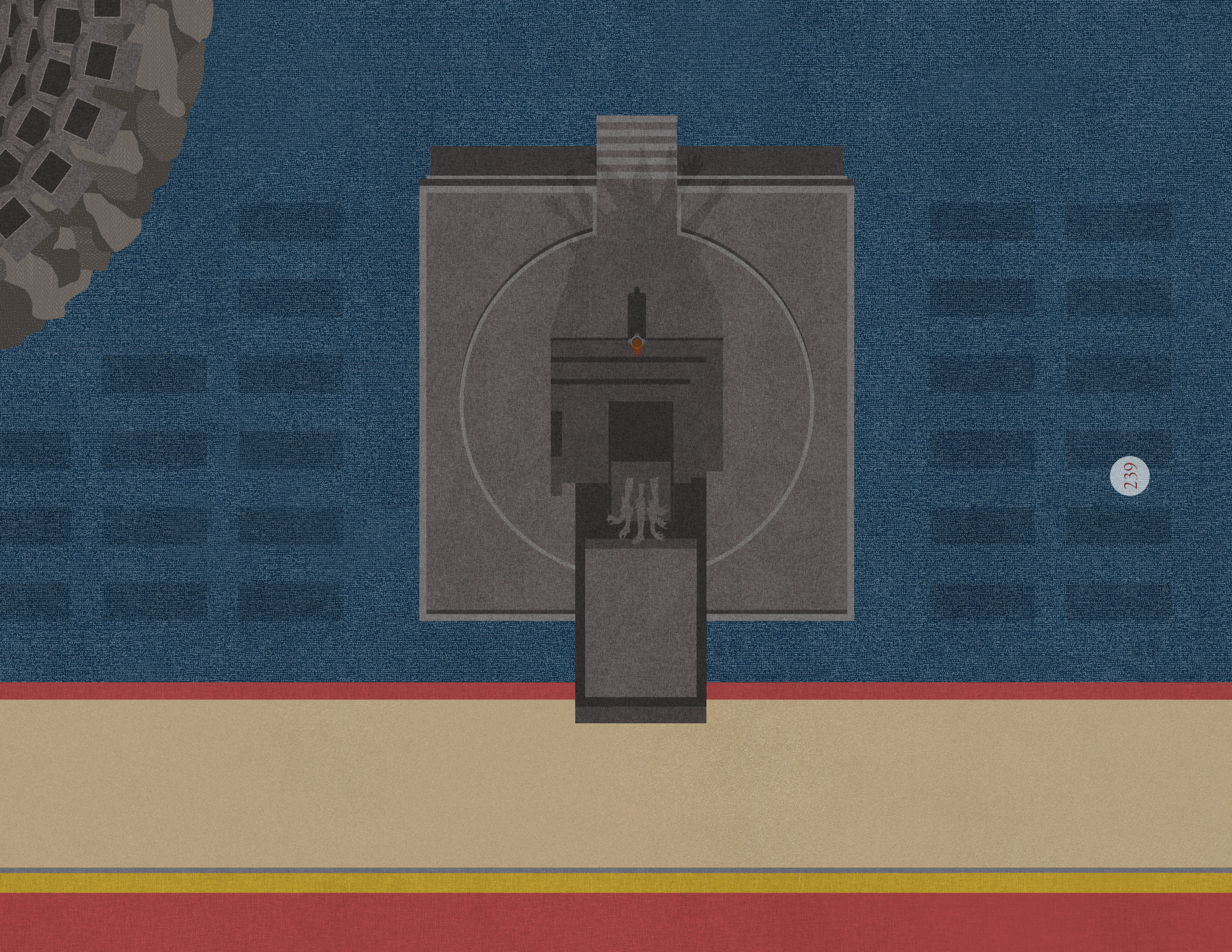
As met once more with limbs,
Devi knew a riddle was at play.
While Nala searched for a shell,
But no match could be found.

“Very well, you heard him.
Be gone then, old man.”
As worn down by his colleague,
He lowered his rifle, to release his prey.

But Hanuman now fixated,
On the sculpture that stood ahead,
Understood that a quick exit,
Was not written in their fate.

“My gratitude to you both,
For granting this senior passage.
But before I take my leave,
I must ask a parting question.”

“For you see, a memorial stood,
Sculpted here, many moons ago.
What has happened to its clay?
What looms now in its place?”



“Well, look around, old man,
And find you will, the answer you seek.
For its makers sculpted a lie,
So it was replaced by Lanka’s truth.”

The three then glanced to the sea,
To find their reflections smothered by clay,
As scattering the waves, were the familiar remains,
Of hundreds of arms and shells.

“So this was the fate that befell,
That clay altar I once knew.
But tell me, you must, children,
What lie did it dare tell?”

“As I recall, its dear makers,
That sculpted each arm and shell,
Did so in loving memory,
Of the thousands that were maimed.”

“Old man, the sculpture you speak of,
Was a deceptive rally in support of Tigers.
For its clay was not for the innocent,
It was a discreet call to resume the war.”

“This sculpture needed to be torn,
In order for Lanka to move forward.
For peace now settles our island,
And that is all we must remember.”

Hanuman stood aghast,
Glaring angrily at the guard.
To which, the other behind him,
Stepped forward and interjected.

"What he means is this new stone,
Has been refined for your people.
The last sculpture had no permit,
It did not know what it tried to say."

"For this ebony has been cleansed,
Sanitized of the clay's lies.
For this sculpture will be a symbol,
Of our history for your children."

"For you see, time can erode clay,
And smooth away its impressions,
But our stone is forever.
Our stories will not be lost."

"No need for such pandering, brother."
Boomed the bearded guard ahead.
"Do not forget we won the battle,
Grateful they should be to still exist."

"I know you wish I be silent,
But I do not forget the turmoil they incited.
For those they try to remember,
I stutter not, are better off forgotten."

Devi's fists began to curl,
And anticipating a burst of emotion,
Nala unravelled her fist with his,
While Hanuman drew from her rage.

"Children, why do you speak such filth?
You imply that all Tamils incited terror.
That every soul bore arms against you,
That none were victims themselves."

"To equate them all as Tigers,
To rob them of the right to be remembered,
You draw from the words that justified,
The cage and its killing fields."

Looking at one another,
The guards began to chuckle.
As the bearded guard, knelt to Hanuman,
A snarl spreading across his face.

"How dare you say they were victims?
Dead terrorists do not deserve sympathy.
For those that perished, their fate was written,
All we must remember now is our victory."

"For you see, even the clay we leveled,
Never did we intend to one day rebuild,
For if it were not for the world and their woes,
This island would be razed to the ground."

And at these words, his colleague behind him,
Pulled the guard back to his side.
“You talk too much, why tell him such things?
Move along, ferryman, your time is up.”

“For I have been patient with you,
But your questions do not look to cease.
Depart at once, and stay true to your word,
Let our paths never again cross.”

But Hanuman, now unable,
To disguise his heaping anger,
Ignored the dismissal of the guard,
Digging one swift row towards him.

“Do not tell me what to do.
I will stop questioning when I desire.
For I have been patient with you both,
But I see it is time I speak plainly.”

“Tell me why this new stone,
Is devoid of any shells.
How dare you conceal why,
Our arms drowned in this sea”

“For our memorial was not only,
To remember their lost lives,
But also how they were lured,
And murdered from above.”

“You have no right,
To desecrate the memory,
Of those, you and your armies,
Systematically killed.”

“For you may try to overwrite,
What took place across our land.
But the suffering of three decades,
The Tamil people will never forget.”

And before the bearded officer,
Could berate Hanuman with his threats,
A bullet grazed the vanara’s cheek,
As the stern officer reloaded his rifle.

“Leave, say not another word,
Or the next bullet will strike your chest.
And as you wither, as I did your clay,
I will topple this stone in your name.”

“For never forget, ferryman,
This is the most that your people will get.
So test us with another breath,
And I will take away what was given.”

“For it is people like you that continue,
To disrupt our island’s peace.
The war is over, do not start another,
This is our Lanka, accept it or leave.”

To which Hanuman sighed,
Fate disarming His strength from being evoked.
As He rowed their vessel past the dock,
Lowering His head as the guards laughed.

As the memorial faded into the distance,
It was Devi that stood first,
As Nala crouched patiently,
Awaiting his friend to speak her heart.

“What happens in Eelam, my Lord?
Did the war not come to an end?
The words of the guards strike fear in my heart,
Has peace not settled our land?”

“Peace is relative, Devi,
Given only to those the victor decides.
But a new battle was waged,
At the conclusion of the last.”

“A tactical war against memory,
Where blood does not pool the land,
Instead, this thirst, is invited in code,
Just as the beginnings of the last war.”

“As using the past to fear monger,
To justify the rewriting of history,
They mean to erase the dream of Eelam,
As they continue to test the uncontested.”

“For the victors now control,
The way that time is remembered.
Ignored is accountability,
Refuted are all facts.”

“As anything now counter,
To the memory reforged,
Is hunted by the state,
To be revised or destroyed.”

“For this memorial was not the first,
Nor shall it be the last.
To be toppled, tossed to waves,
And remade to tell their story.”

“For these crimes I have witnessed,
Is why Vibheeshana and I lent our strength,
To the memorial that now scatters the sea,
For she was sculpted from our hands.”

“Created in discreet with the children,
Of those it sought to remember.
We molded each arm and shell in hope,
Our divine powers may grant it immunity.”

“But alas the same poison,
That shot me from the sky,
Flowed in their veins, that sought to destroy,
Its clay no match for its hatred.”

“And so these two pieces,
We now hold in this vessel,
Is but fragments of the world,
That await when we step ashore.”

Devi began to tremble,
Stumbling over her words.
As Nala held the hand of his friend,
To try to steady her from her shake.

“But Lord, you are Hanuman,
There must be something you can do.
Let us return. You can throw over the guards.
We can rebuild the memorial together.”

“No, Devi, I gave my word,
I must grant safe passage for you both.
My allegiance lies with the Goddess,
I must take you both home.”

Devi, now in anger,
At Hanuman’s direct tone,
Tossed the clay fragments into the sea,
Unable to bear their sight.

And at this, Nala ran to their vessel’s edge,
Watching the shell sink atop the arm,
As he realized he was bound for a home,
Engaged in a war to remember.

For the past of his people was being erased,
Before they could be embraced by his eyes.
For libraries had been painted over,
Memorials had been rewritten to tell lies.

As the youth wondered, once he arrived,
What curse would befall his path.
That if when he met Eelam, he would be too late,
And was written out of the history of his land.

Hanuman continued to row into the distance,
In hopes to spot again Eelam's smoke,
But instead their eyes were blinded by a light,
A golden statue towering the sea.

The two ran to Hanuman's side,
As a vessel approached from its base,
And seeing this, the vanara changed forms again,
To the guard that had scarred his cheek.

Intruders!

Chapter V

The scarred Hanuman directed their vessel,
To align with the path of the one that approached,
As the vanara rowed, towards the gold ahead,
The sculpture's shine dulling to reveal its face.

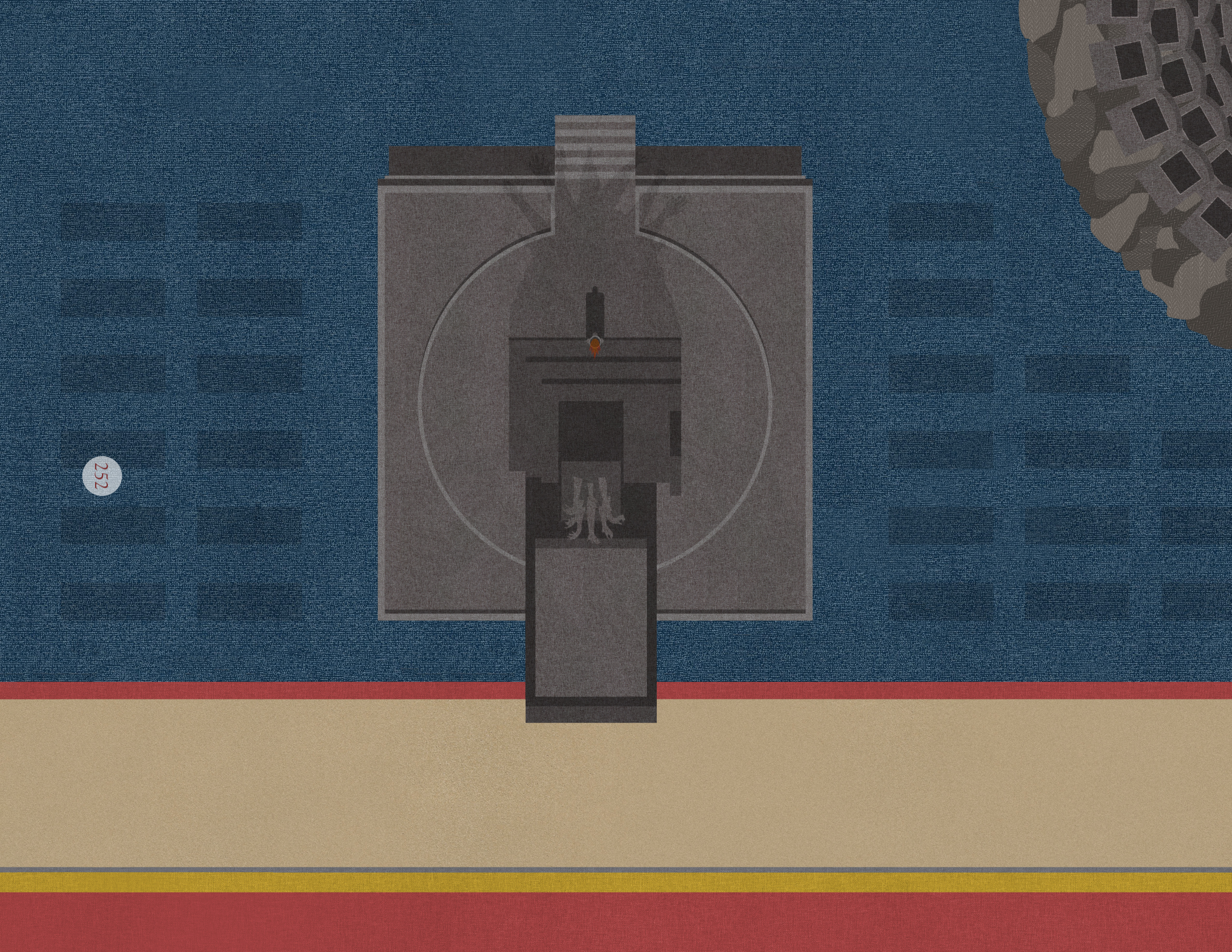
For dressed in a militant's uniform,
One arm holding a rifle, the other waving a flag,
A soldier burst from a mound of stones,
His sculpted height triple that of the ebony.

The face of the militant rejoiced,
While a dove rested atop his shoulder,
As the roar of this monument summoned waves of fear,
Stealing the breath of Devi and Nala.

It was then that the vessel ahead,
Swiveled to a stop in front of their own,
As an officer, a youth, the same age as Nala.
Smiled at the vanara, fooled by his disguise.

"Sir, it is an honour to greet you,
Have you come for our monument's inauguration?
I have been tasked to escort each attending guest,
That has arrived to celebrate this occasion."





"Your guess is correct," spoke Hanuman,
"I come to honour the Lions that trampled the Tigers.
For I beam with pride seeing the golden soldier ahead,
He is proof of our undisputed victory."

Hanuman then raised Devi and Nala,
As the two gasped, unaware of the vanara's plans.
To which the sapphire waves began to pick its pace,
As the golden soldier ahead appeared to stare at Devi.

"I have with me two dear colleagues,
I hope, my comrade, it is no bother.
I wished for them both to share in this moment,
So they too could see the beauty of our victory."

The militant youth, at first sceptical,
Questioning the features that riddled Devi and Nala,
Knew that he could not question his superior,
As he flashed Hanuman a hesitant smile.

"Of course, there is no issue, Sir.
A colleague of yours is a colleague of mine.
For this monument's unveiling is a celebration for all,
Let us go together and embrace its beauty."

And as the youth stepped back to the helm of his boat,
To guide their vessels to the monument's dock,
Hanuman turned back to the two that remained startled,
Beginning to articulate the nature of His plan.

“I have heard whispers of this monument, children,
Tales of its gold have travelled this sea.
But first I must apologize for the abruptness of your reveal,
For fate called me to act at the soldier’s gleam.”

“Devi, it is time that you see,
A glimpse of what unfolds across Eelam,
As we will be recited a history of the battles forgone,
Once again by the stones they have forged.”

At these words the youthful soldier ahead,
Docked his vessel, prompting Hanuman to do the same,
As the four walked towards the steps of the monument,
Where a hundred soldiers huddled at its base.

The hundred did not notice the arrival of the four,
Their attention with a lone figure atop the steps.
As Nala thought him another reckless soldier,
Until he saw his golden-brown mane.

For a creature spoke before the soldiers,
Standing as a man with the face of a lion.
Adorned in the uniform of a decorated general,
His fangs glistened as he roared to the crowd.

“We rejoice today, my comrades,
Not only for the gold we have erected,
But for the decade that has passed since our victory.
For our people finally thrive under our control.”

“To those that man our check-points,
To those that grow our power at our parliament,
I thank you all for maintaining this peace,
In keeping our island within the right hands.”

“For Lanka will always be ours.
They will not rid us of our own land.
We will fight to the death, just as our fathers,
For we refuse to concede even an inch.”

“For you see this soldier that we all stand before,
His gold cements all we have built.
For if the Tigers dare rise again,
He will pierce their hearts with Lanka’s flag.”

“We will continue to ensure our legacy remains pure.
Our stories will mark every corner of our land.
Our people will thrive, just as centuries before,
So long as we stay true to this statue’s inscription.”

“For our victory will lie in the periphery,
Of all who wander our island.
This is our home, know that only we hold its keys,
Rejoice, my comrades, we have won.”

“This monument is for everyone of you,
His roar channels both mine and yours.
Now join me, as we feast to celebrate this new age,
To a millennia more where Lanka is ours.”

The crowd began to jeer as the lion walked down,
Following their leader towards a mud hut below.
As Hanuman looked to a hot-headed Devi,
While Nala stood overwhelmed at the words just spoken.

"Come, my children, I must know one thing,
Before we depart from this land.
The general spoke of an inscription.
I must know what words fuel their hate."

Hanuman walked towards the monument,
Stepping to an etching at the base of the mound.
The vanara ran His fingers over the text,
Sighing deeply at what He had just read.

Devi and Nala both stepped to the monument,
Devi trying to contain the anger that had built.
But instead, her fury was set alight,
Finding the inscription was written only in Sinhalese.

Devi looked to Hanuman,
To which the vanara whispered a translation,
And at these words, the warmth of Devi's eyes,
Was overwhelmed by her built fury.

Nala certain that he wished not to read,
Stepped back at the sight of Devi's eyes.
As Devi began to flail, spitting on the words,
While a rumble was felt in the air.

Hanuman tried his best to hold her back,
To stop her from alerting those in the hut below,
But her anger was no match for the divine vanara,
As she cursed this Lanka that had abandoned her.

“My Lord, why do they continue to erase us?
They have won, why do they need more?
Why does their history brand my people their villain?
When will they have enough?”

And it was then that Devi’s pendant began to glow,
As Nala and Hanuman looked at her neck in wonder.
Its pearl shining an aura that outshone the monument,
A beam of light that lit each of their faces.

Devi clutched onto her pendant,
The warmth of its light settling her nerves.
But this light was a warning, as following its shine,
The rumble from before was once again heard.

Devi and Nala looked all around,
For the origin of these paralyzing shakes,
Until finally they found Hanuman looking up,
At the monument, alive, looking down at them below.

The soldier bent his head down,
Putting his rifle to the side,
As the dove on his shoulder flew away,
His eyes locking with Devi's.

The statue fixated on her pendant,
Its shine reflecting off of its gold.
To which the statue, winced at the light,
Then banged the shaft of his flag into the ground.

And at this Hanuman knew,
That the awoken statue had seen through their deception.
“Intruders!” the soldier boomed, his mouth ajar as before,
As the three hearing him, ran for the dock.

The hundred that had left,
Returned at this one word.
Chasing the three intruders to the dock,
Their sprint led by their feral leader.

As the three raced to their vessel,
Narrowly avoiding a barrage of bullets,
They jumped back in Hanuman’s vessel,
The vanara frantically paddling east.

And it was as they sighed in relief,
That Nala saw the youth that had led them to the island.
Resting a weapon onto his shoulder,
Loading a shell, just as the one Nala once boarded.

The youth then shot at their vessel,
And seeing the shell fly towards their feet,
Hanuman swept Devi and Nala into His arms,
And leapt as far as the Goddess would allow.

The three were knocked unconscious,
By the impact of the blast,
Floating helplessly amidst the waves,
Of the endless, sapphire sea.

For the golden monument and its men,
Were now just a speck in the distance,
While Hanuman's vessel scattered the sea,
Another victim of careless shells.

And it was then that Nala awoke,
Floating next to him Devi and Hanuman,
And having also survived the shells,
The miniature bobbed between the three.

Nala pushed the two onto the model,
Then leaned his own cheek against its glass,
No longer surprised by the model's presence,
And the magic of its infallibility.

As the youth looked ahead,
And saw Eelam's smoke rising again,
Closing his eyes, Nala tried to imagine,
How it would feel to finally be home.

The Island of Matriarchs

Chapter VI

Devi awoke on a charpai,
To the waft of a familiar breeze,
Finding Nala at her feet, smiling.
Extending his arm from a leaf.

“Finally, you are awake, Devi,
I know your mind must race with questions.
But eat before your hunger conquers.
Your body has slept for three days.”

The two sat inside an ashram,
Its walls, a familiar stew of mud and twigs,
As Devi ate from a ball of rice,
Carefully sculpted by the youth.

“Three days? Are we in Eelam?
Nala, you must tell me that is where we lie.
For my senses tell I have returned to my ashram.
That the river crashes beyond these doors.”

“Tell me this is not true, Nala,
That my thambi awaits us in the river’s place.
That the smoke that marked Eelam,
We have found and now I awake to extinguish.”

Nala examined Devi,
Pupils drenched in sorrow and fatigue,
Hair unbraided, fallen to her shoulders,
Her pendant, her only glimmer.

“We are closer now to Eelam,
But still, Devi, we are not home.
For we have washed further east to an island,
But can now smell the smoke we followed.”

“For our vessel now resides,
In ruins amidst the sea.
As Lord Hanuman speaks with the others,
On how to conquer this final length.”

“The others?” chimed Devi,
As she ate another bite from Nala's hand.
“Do not worry, satisfy your hunger,
And I will then introduce you to the mothers.”

When the two stepped out of the ashram,
Devi found its walls stood amongst the shores,
Of the sea that had swept her from Yama,
As its sand filtered her toes.

And in its horizon was a glimpse,
Of a familiar smoke where their home awaited.
As Devi stepped back at the trail’s sight,
Only to find a mountain waiting behind them.

Comprised of a pile of large, rugged stones,
Its cliffs blocked any view from where they arrived.
As if this obstacle prompted its visitors to move forward,
A reminder of the path they had chosen.

And to further reaffirm this path,
The smell of Eelam's smoke now arrived,
Travelling through Devi as if plumes of incense.
Its aroma seizing her body.

Devi stood paralyzed in place,
Reminded suddenly of her thambi,
As Nala nudged her to look ahead,
To a familiar face arriving.

For Hanuman, in His divine form,
Waved to Devi from the shore ahead.
Behind Him, a hundred strangers,
Each smiling at the two approached.

"It is wonderful to see you awake, Devi.
Nala has yet to leave your side.
Know that we both have him to thank,
Or this miniature as he continues to plead."

As the vanara backed away to show,
A woman holding the model in her arms,
As Devi gasped at the miniature's persistence,
Still without faults, in pristine condition.

“I still shudder, my children,
When I remember the arc of that shell.
Certain I was, that we were all doomed,
But bless the Goddess, we are closer now to Eelam.”

“But my apologies, let me first introduce,
Those that have taken us into their care,
Please, Devi, extend your gratitude,
To the mothers of our dear Eelam.”

Women of every age stood behind Hanuman,
Each face worn by the strength of the same pain.
As the hundred dressed in black, worn saris,
Their fabric flowing against the wind.

Under their arm, each woman,
Guarded a framed photo.
Their palms clenching its edges,
Where a groove had formed for the frame to rest.

The woman holding the model,
Then stepped forward to meet Devi,
The two's reflections appearing over the model’s glass,
As Nala noted they shared the same eyes.

“There is no need to thank us, my Lord,
We only did what our nature told.
It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Devi,
I am Uma, and we too share your home.”

Uma then explained to Devi,
That she and the hundred were each mothers.
That since the destruction of the war's finale,
They had marched the island for the disappeared.

Uma then placed her frame upright,
That lied tucked beneath her arm,
Atop the model she held before them,
Revealing the face it proudly contained.

The colour of the face had dissolved,
To a decade of unrelenting sun,
For the face had faded, no longer decipherable,
All that was left was his stoic eyes.

"This was my child, I have not seen him,
Since the days that followed Mullivaikal.
For he was poached from the fields, forced to surrender,
And for a decade, I have marched for his return."

"Devi, I have marched for 2000 days,
To know where it is my son now lies,
As every mother you see before you,
Seeks their own missing, in hope of closure."

"All we seek for is our beloveds,
For the accountable to be held accountable.
To either know our children live in torture,
Or if they have been murdered under this ruse."

Devi thought to her appa,
The legacy of Lanka that disappeared the unwanted,
And then to her own exile,
Realizing that she too had been cast away.

"You say, Uma, that you marched for 2000 days,
But why then do you reside these shores?
The smoke of our land I see up ahead,
For what reason are you not in Eelam?"

"Devi, we lie on this island,
Not by our own volition,
But as a consequence of another march,
That began three moons ago."

"For a decade after the war's end.
Led by their anger against the state,
A protest was led by the majority,
Seeking to rectify their economic woes."

"Toppling the very criminals,
That for decades sentenced us to death,
We thought at first they fought for us,
Soon to realize we were left from their equation."

"For after our tireless chanting,
We thought we could join their siege,
But not a soul amongst their crowd showed interest,
In adding our pleas with theirs."

“For they deemed their protest a struggle,
But refused to acknowledge ours,
As in time, we avoided their march,
Opting to continue only our own.”

“But you see, once their protest achieved,
The demands they so dearly sought,
Our voices, still chanting, loud and proud,
Were no longer permitted to be heard.”

“And so they tossed us into a boat,
And stranded us onto this island.
For we were deported a moon ago,
And your arrival tells our exile nears its end.”

“For we have for three days plotted,
With Nala and our dear Lord.
Hoping to find a path ahead,
That can tread this final length.”

“For just as you Devi,
Seek to see your thambi again,
We wish to return to Eelam with you,
For our protest is far from over.”

At these words, the remaining women,
Came to Devi’s side,
As their warmth paired with the smoke's fragrance,
Began to make her eyes well.

For one last hurdle stood,
Between Devi and her shores,
And here she stood with the very people,
That she yearned for a lifetime to again meet.

Hanuman stood smiling,
At the homecoming to come,
Only for it to wave over Him,
Noting the emotion that took over Nala.

As the youth stood broken,
Staring into the model in Uma's arms.
As Hanuman could have sworn,
He had begun to talk with his temple.

The mothers and the three,
Then spent that night around a fire,
Talking of the brave stories,
Of their people across Lanka.

Those that had passed.
Those that had gone missing.
The land that they hoped to soon return to.
Nala stared nervously into the horizon.

Mourning at Sunrise

Chapter VII

As the night was falling to dawn,
Devi awoke to a wash of orange,
Remembering her once reverent routine,
Rising to begin her morning prayers.

For she and the others had fallen asleep,
Around the fire they lit on their shore,
While dreaming of the land that continued to rid them,
Their hearts unwilling to surrender.

And it was as Devi looked to the horizon,
Dreaming of her thambi's head against her chest,
She found Nala, sitting awake at the shore's edge,
Looking tenderly into the distance.

Devi could at once sense the anxiety,
That she had first encountered in the forest.
Spreading as a disease through the youth's mind,
Unwilling to let him breathe.

Devi stood over Nala,
Finding the model wrapped in his hands.
His eyes fixated on the library within,
The altar aligned with the smoke in the east.

“Nala, why do you sit still this morning?
Your mind looks as if it is consumed in worry.
Tell me, my child, what is it that fills you,
Why embrace this miniature in your hands?”

Teary-eyed, Nala looked to Devi,
With streams drying over his cheeks.
“I do not know Devi, but fear strikes my soul,
I do not know if this is the home I am to return to.”

“O Nala, throw away such worry.
Of course you return to the right home.
Trust in the Goddess, as you always have,
Eelam is where you heart lives.”

“This feels as if a riddle, Devi,
Just as when we were taunted by Her mountain,
For I wonder if I am being drawn away again,
To a place where I do not belong.”

Devi frowned at Nala,
Realizing his hesitation needed to be calmed,
As she placed both her hands onto his shoulders,
Raising the youth to his feet.

Nala began to shake,
Unwilling to let go of the model.
As tears began to fall onto its glass,
Rolling onto the shore.

Devi embraced the youth,
Stroking his hair as she imagined her thambi,
As she looked towards Eelam, then the mountain behind,
Wondering if a better view would calm her friend.

"Nala, let us leave this shore behind,
And climb the rubble that opposes Eelam.
For we have scoured these waters for far too long,
Let us see what these peaks can offer."

Nala agreed with hesitation,
As they walked towards its stones,
And while Devi urged he leave the model behind,
The youth unwilling, held the miniature over his head.

The two scaled each ledge of the mound,
The mountain a shriveled pile of stones.
Its rocks, oddly refined, smoothed along corners,
But the two paid no mind on account of Nala's worry.

As Devi and Nala neared the peak of the mountain,
Devi looked ahead to the sea they had left,
To see glimmers of gold and the shadow of ebony,
Of the memorials that continued to haunt.

But Nala did not join her stare,
Instead turning towards the smoke of Eelam,
As he could finally see the outline of the island,
Consumed in waves of palmyras.

Nala's heart began to beat heavy,
Seeing the unknown land ahead,
As Devi stretched her arm, noting too her home's outline,
Guiding Nala onto the mountain's peak.

Devi looked to Eelam with love,
Reminded of a childhood she had longed to remember,
But then looked to the youth to find emptiness,
Consuming his mind and soul.

"Nala, do you remember,
When you first came to my ashram?
When you refused to leave my charpai?
You have come such a long way."

"What is it, my dear, that tells you,
The land ahead is not what you seek?
I know this journey has seen much strife,
But it is your home that awaits ahead."

"Devi, you must understand,
What it is that I have always sought.
For all I have craved is a belonging.
A belonging that could not be questioned."

"For the home that I was pried from,
Did not offer me such a comfort.
As while I was born to its winter shores,
I remained a foreigner before all else."

“That is why I followed you,
At the sight of this model at the pyre.
In hope that this was my sign,
That I was to return to my true home.”

“But Devi, from the protests,
To our excursion through this sea,
I have been told the land we see ahead,
Will not invite me as I had hoped.”

“Look at the mothers. Look at you.
All continue to be thrown away.
How will I find belonging,
When even you do not have what I crave?”

“I am but a stranger to Eelam,
I have yet to feel even its air.
How am I to believe that this is the home,
That I have wanted for all my life?”

“Devi, I understand you yearn for your thambi,
And the land on which you were raised.
But the coldness of suburbia is where I am from.
There is nothing that connects me to this tear.”

“Tell me, why am I not allowed a home?
This path is just another where I do not belong.
For this pilgrimage has only made clear,
That I am an outsider and always will be.”

Nala looked to Devi in defeat,
Head bowed as he continued to tear over the model.
To which Devi took the miniature from his hands,
Beginning to stare at the library within.

“Nala, I cannot promise you,
That you will ever feel what it is you desire,
For the belonging that you seek,
Is likely one you will never attain.”

“But home does not need to be singular,
Nor rooted to just a place.
For you, my dear, have a series of homes,
Each unique and interconnected.”

“From the protests that we wandered,
To the many people we have met,
In this journey, we have embraced a series of homes,
And they will all accompany you in Eelam’s arms.”

“Home can be place,
It can also be a feeling, even a person.
It can also be the journey towards finding that belonging.
Why do you limit where you gather your comfort?”

“For even my land is not my only home,
As for decades I have had to rely,
On knowing that one day I will return.
As not giving up on my home was my home.”

“Nala, I know you want the same,
As the children of the land you were born to.
But you are an Eelam Tamil, so you must understand,
For us to belong will always be contested.”

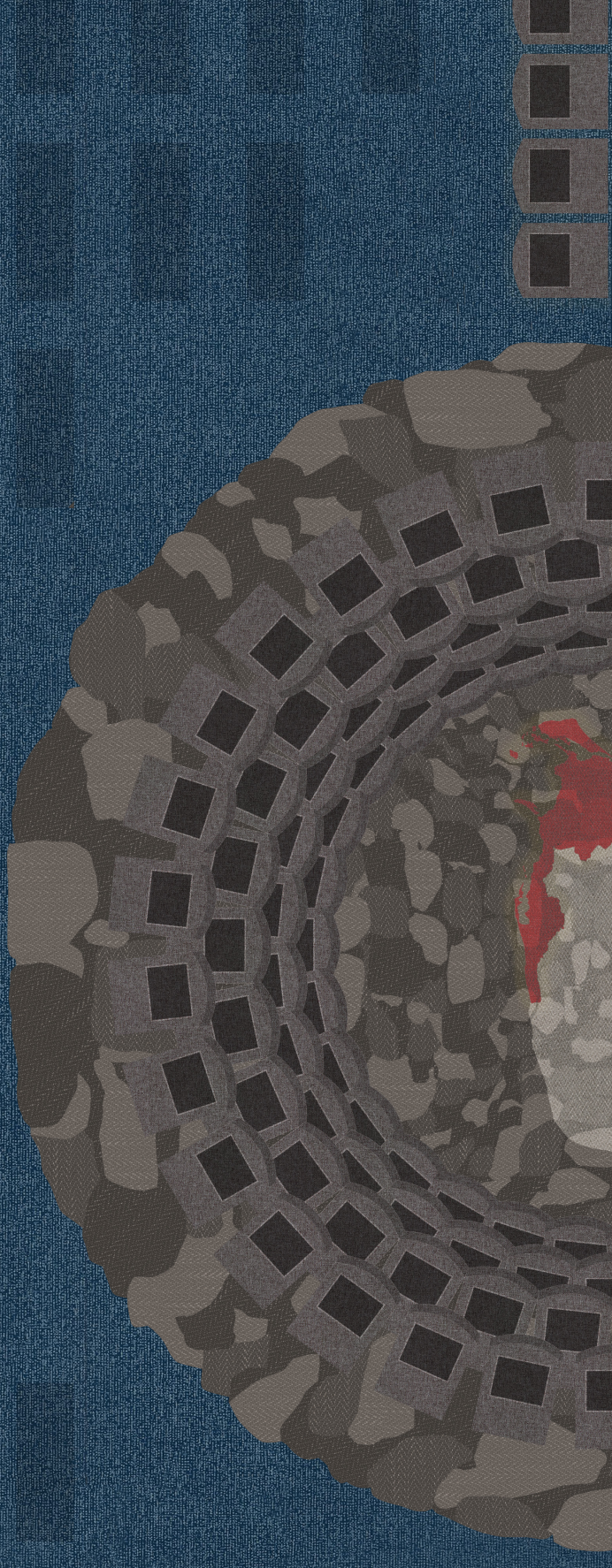
“We are not afforded such stability,
Of a home that welcomes without question.
But that does not mean that we do not belong,
Our homes just need to be fought for.”

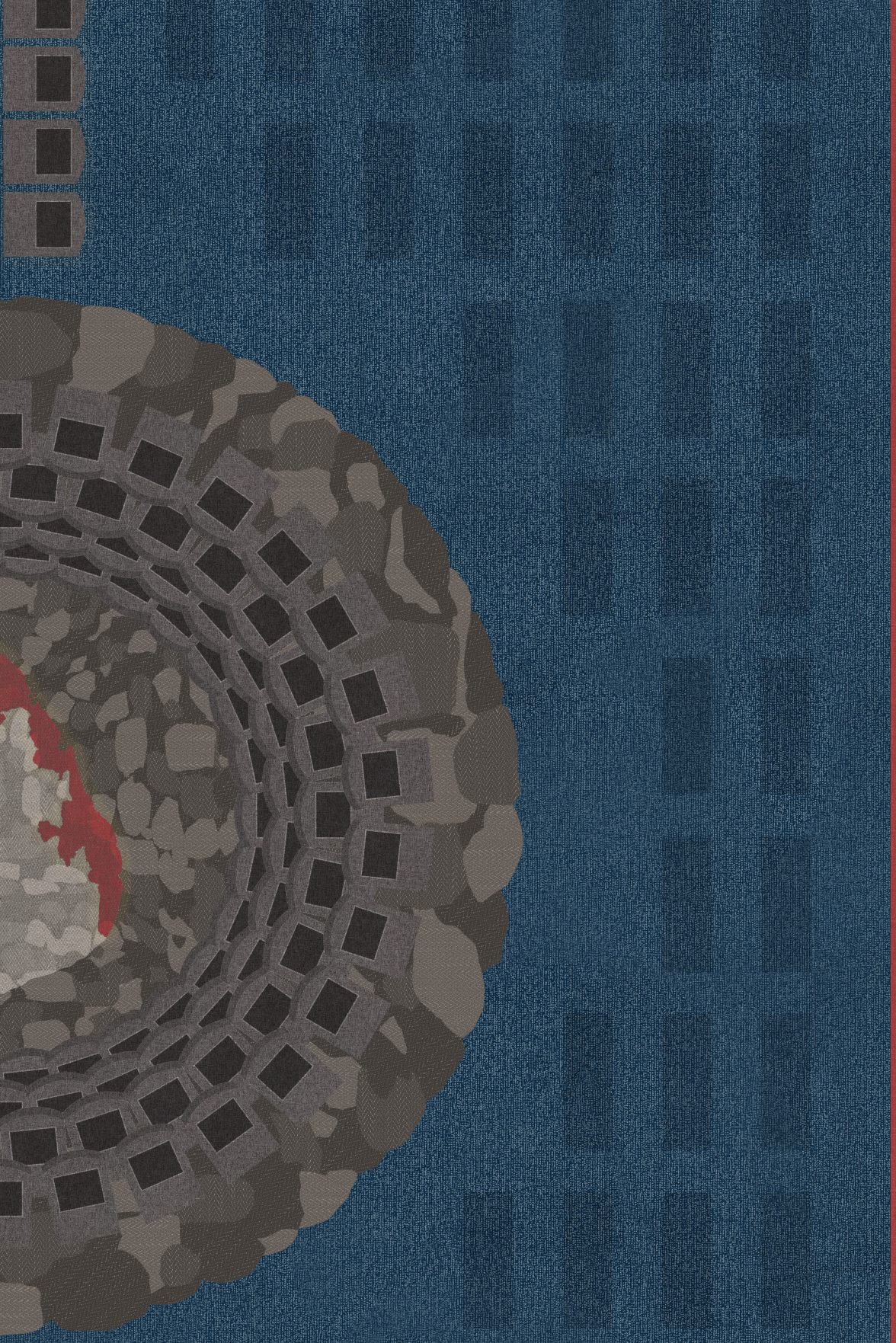
“For the temple that brought you here,
That lies trapped within this model,
Is a reminder of this very fact,
Of all that you and I and our people are.”

“My library is your sanctum,
Because you will find our history within.
For so long as you have a temple,
You will always be able to find a home.”

“For even if you peer within,
And see our history being set alight,
That too is your home, but also your sign,
To rise, return, and defend.”

At these words, the sound of footsteps were heard,
As a familiar face appeared from the cliff.
Hanuman had followed the two to the peak,
Continuing the conversation without missing a breath.





“Nala, Devi, it is hearing you both,
That I remember why I look to your people.
For your home continue to be questioned at each turn,
But never do you surrender that this where you belong.”

“For I have seen each generation,
Reckon with this very confusion,
Each ending their journey wondering,
If Eelam is their true home.”

“Nala, you will not belong as you hope,
To the island you see ahead.
For such belonging does not exist for you.
But that does not mean it is not where you must go.”

“Eelam is your home, Nala.
And it is also mine, and also Devi’s.
Do not worry about what you will find,
Before you have felt its gracious warmth.”

“Conflict will always follow,
But so too will the history of your people,
Ask them to lend you their strength to your step,
And you will find belonging anywhere you go.”

Nala began to smile,
As the sun ahead began to rise.
And for a moment, within the palmyras,
A glimpse of three domes was flashed before them.

And at this glimpse, Devi's pendant,
Began again to float from her chest.
As Nala and Hanuman stood back in worry,
At what now the necklace would incite.

Everything was silent at first,
Until the stones at their feet began to glow.
As Tamil characters began to appear,
Inscribed into its surface.

The three kneeled to the ground,
As Devi placed the model before her.
Each tracing the etched words with their fingers,
To find names, followed by their rank and position.

For Devi's pearl had unveiled,
That the mountain that they stood atop,
Was not a creation of nature,
But a pile of a desecrated cemetery.

Hanuman horrified by where they stood,
Told the two it was time that they left.
But as Devi went to pick up the model,
Her eyes were caught by the words of the stone beneath.

For Devi placed the model to the side,
Her body shaking over the stone,
As Hanuman pleaded it was time that they leave,
But Devi was unwilling to move from her spot.

Nala walked over to Devi,
Noticing she had begun to cry.
As she looked to the youth, her lips in a tremble.
“This is the name of my thambi.”

Nala then witnessed the necklace around Devi,
Begin again to glow from her neck.
As the vibrant pearl morphed into a cyanide capsule,
As Nala realized her thambi had died as a Tiger.

Devi in shock, looked to Nala,
Then to the rising sun over Eelam.
As she ripped the pill off of her neck,
And pressed it into her mouth.

But before Devi could bite down,
For having failed to protect her thambi,
Nala tackled her, forcing her to spit out the pill,
As Devi began to wail.

“Just let me die, Nala.
I abandoned him and now his memory lies in rubble.
All I have dreamt of is to return to Eelam,
But how can I return knowing this is all that is left?”

Hanuman looked to Nala in worry,
As Devi remained hunched over her thambi’s stone.
“Leave me alone, both of you. I will do nothing.
Leave me to myself. Leave me to mourn.”

Nala and Hanuman solemnly abided,
Returning back to the eastern shore,
Where they told the mothers of the mountain's secret,
As they too fell into a crisis of tears.

Nala, however, was not left swayed,
Away from the island ahead.
For he felt it now his duty,
To seek justice, that he needed to return.

For even if Eelam was not the home,
That he once so deeply craved,
He knew he still belonged to this land,
That it was time to rise and march.

Nala Setu

Chapter VIII

"Perhaps we need to build a ship?"
"We do not have such time, Uma."
"You saw how many stones they have piled,
That is the work of those that intend to be back."

For after the discovery of the stones,
Hanuman knew they could not stay.
Understanding the incident at the monument,
Had likely increased officer patrol.

And if these officials were using,
This island as these tombstones show,
They were likely to return soon,
To offload more of what tested their memory.

Devi still rested atop the stone mountain,
Having not returned since the morning before.
As all Nala had as an indication of her health,
Was the smoke that trailed from her fire that night.

"Lord, what can I do?
I cannot stand to leave her like this.
Surely, there is a way that I can help.
To bring her back to our shore."

“Nala, give her time to herself,
To understand what it is that she feels,
For she has lost one of her homes,
That she had hoped for decades to return to.”

Nala, anxious, at leaving his friend,
Walked back to sit with the model,
As Hanuman stood worried now for Devi,
And whether she still wished to return.

As Hanuman thought to her and her thambi,
Reading within Yalpanam's library,
The vanara remembered a text,
That had perished during its arson.

The text of a Prince seeking his abducted Bride,
The story of Rama of which He was once apart.
As during this story, a bridge needed to be formed,
Where an architect would step forward.

For in that moment, Hanuman realized,
That this was the fate of Nala,
As he looked to the youth with the model,
Suddenly knowing their path of escape.

For Hanuman knew that Nala,
Was the answer to crossing this sea,
For the youth was to recreate the bridge,
That once spanned from Bharat to Lanka.

Hanuman approached Nala,
Sitting down at his side,
And told him that it was the youth,
That would guide them to Eelam.

Nala looked puzzled,
"I do not know what you seek.
I do not possess such power, my Lord,
I cannot create such a bridge."

"And even if I did hold such strength,
There is nothing for us to use.
The waters are no longer blessed,
All we have is stone, bound only to sink."

Hanuman looked around,
And Nala was surely correct.
There was no material for them to use,
To span this final length.

But the vanara was adamant,
He knew this was the only path.
As He approached Nala again,
Telling him His own story.

"I did not always know my own strength,
For the Gods suppressed my leap as a child,
For it was not until I knew Sita lay in Lanka,
That I unlocked my power within."

“Nala, I believe you too,
Have a hidden knowledge deep within.
Search within yourself, my child,
And I know you will find what we seek.”

“Let go of your surroundings,
Only then will you hear.
The faint whispers of the divine,
To unlock your inner strength.”

Sceptical, Nala closed his eyes,
Sitting on the shore in meditation,
As the mothers circled the youth,
While he cleared his mind of his worries.

At first Nala heard nothing,
Certain this was not the answer,
But then he heard a strum,
Of a veena's tune from behind him.

Nala opened his eyes,
And looked towards the mountain,
Where Devi sat patiently,
Realizing his answer lay with her.

The youth trekked up the stones,
As the mothers and Hanuman watched from below.
Nala silently reading every name,
As he scaled the mountain to its top.

Once at its peak, he saw Devi,
Looking disheveled, not having slept,
As he closed his eyes, and meditated once more,
Hearing the veena's strums again.

Nala approached Devi,
Only to realize where the rhythm stemmed,
For it came from the stone of her thambi,
As a whisper flooded only his ear.

“Take us, Nala,
We will be your bridge.
Take Devi with you.
We will take you all home.”

Devi stood in disbelief,
Hearing what Nala had said he had heard,
For the youth had heard her thambi,
And it was he that would guide them home.

The two hurried down to the shore,
Taking with them her thambi’s stone,
As they told Hanuman and the mothers,
That Nala had found a way.

“Nala, are you certain you hear correctly?
For even if these stones can float,
There is not enough stones on this island,
To span such large distance."

Nala had also noticed this,
But trusted in the words of the stone,
And so he returned to the shore to meditate,
Asking Devi's thambi for an answer.

It was at this that a stone began to hover,
From the edge of the mountain they had scaled,
As it flew towards the shore, ahead of Nala,
Expanding to triple its size.

It skipped onto the sea,
And hovered over its waters.
As the stone slotted into place,
Creating the first step of Nala's bridge.

Everyone on the shore stood in awe,
At the stone that had hovered to place,
Only to then watch as a hundred others from the pile,
Began to float towards the sea to do the same.

Nala still sat in meditation,
And could hear the tombstones and their whispers.
As the youth whispered back, guiding them to place,
Hanuman smiling, seeing history repeat.

Finally, the stone in Devi's arms,
Began to hover above her head,
To which Nala awoke, and stepped towards her friend,
Asking that she hold his hand.

Through Nala, Devi could hear the tombstone speak.
As her thambi thanked her for all she had done.
That Nala had told him of the exile she had faced,
All to return back to his arms.

“Devi, you did nothing wrong,
I apologize that I do not stand before you.
But know that I did all that I could,
To search for you when you disappeared.”

“You see, Devi, after the night of the burning,
I returned to the remnants of the library.
And in front of the Goddess, I found a trace of you.
The cyanide necklace that you wore all this time.”

“Enraged that they took appa,
And now you, and the very temple I called home,
I placed the pendant to my neck,
And joined the Tigers in search of vengeance. “

“How I passed, Devi,
Know that it does not matter,
But now that I know that you are alive,
I fear I have made a mistake.”

“I am sorry, akka, to leave you alone,
I wish we had more time to spend.
But now it is time that I go, and you return to Eelam.
We will meet again in our library in the next life.”

Upon hearing this Devi began to tear,
As she watched the stone hover to the end of their bridge.
As together the mothers and the three,
Extended a prayer and began to cross the sea.

As they stepped onto Eelam's shores,
Palmyras welcomed the caravan,
As Nala felt a humid breeze run through him,
Kissing him as he stepped on its land.

Ahead they could still see Eelam's smoke,
But not from where it rose,
As Nala looked to Devi,
Realizing another riddle was afoot.

Hanuman then told the two,
To follow the sea's waters that winded into a river,
That Vibheeshana would meet them along their way,
And guide the two towards the library.

The vanara then embraced the two,
Telling them it was time that He left.
That while His promise to the Goddess was now complete,
He wished to continue to guide Her children home.

As Hanuman feeling His power return,
Smiled at the mothers and two at the shore,
Steadying His feet, looking back to the west,
Before leaping into the sky.

The mothers too then said goodbye,
Uma thanking them, then telling their plans.
That they would continue their protest,
Until they were granted the answers they deserved.

And at this the stones behind them,
Hovered to the shore now in front of every mother.
As it shrunk to the size of the frames they all held,
As each mother tucked the slab beneath their other arm.

And when her thambi's stone floated to her,
Devi turned to Nala, as the youth knew why,
Telling her friend that she too will be departing,
Joining the protest of the mothers,

“But go to the library for me, Nala,
For the Goddess surely awaits you there.
It is due time that you found your home,
Just as I always knew mine.”

Devi then embraced Nala,
Giving the youth the model that started his journey,
Telling her friend that they will meet again soon,
Perhaps one day at his own temple.

With that, Nala departed eastwards,
Into the forest following the river and the smoke,
As the youth left behind all those he had befriended,
Approaching this final length alone.

And with the river at the height of his ankle,
Nala decided to walk again through the river,
But as he treaded forward, the water began to rise,
The youth knowing he was not to waver.

From his ankles the water moved up to his shoulders,
As Nala continued to walk with the miniature,
Until finally he heard the voice of the Goddess,
And was completely submerged by Her warmth.

Our Home is Our Temple

Conclusion

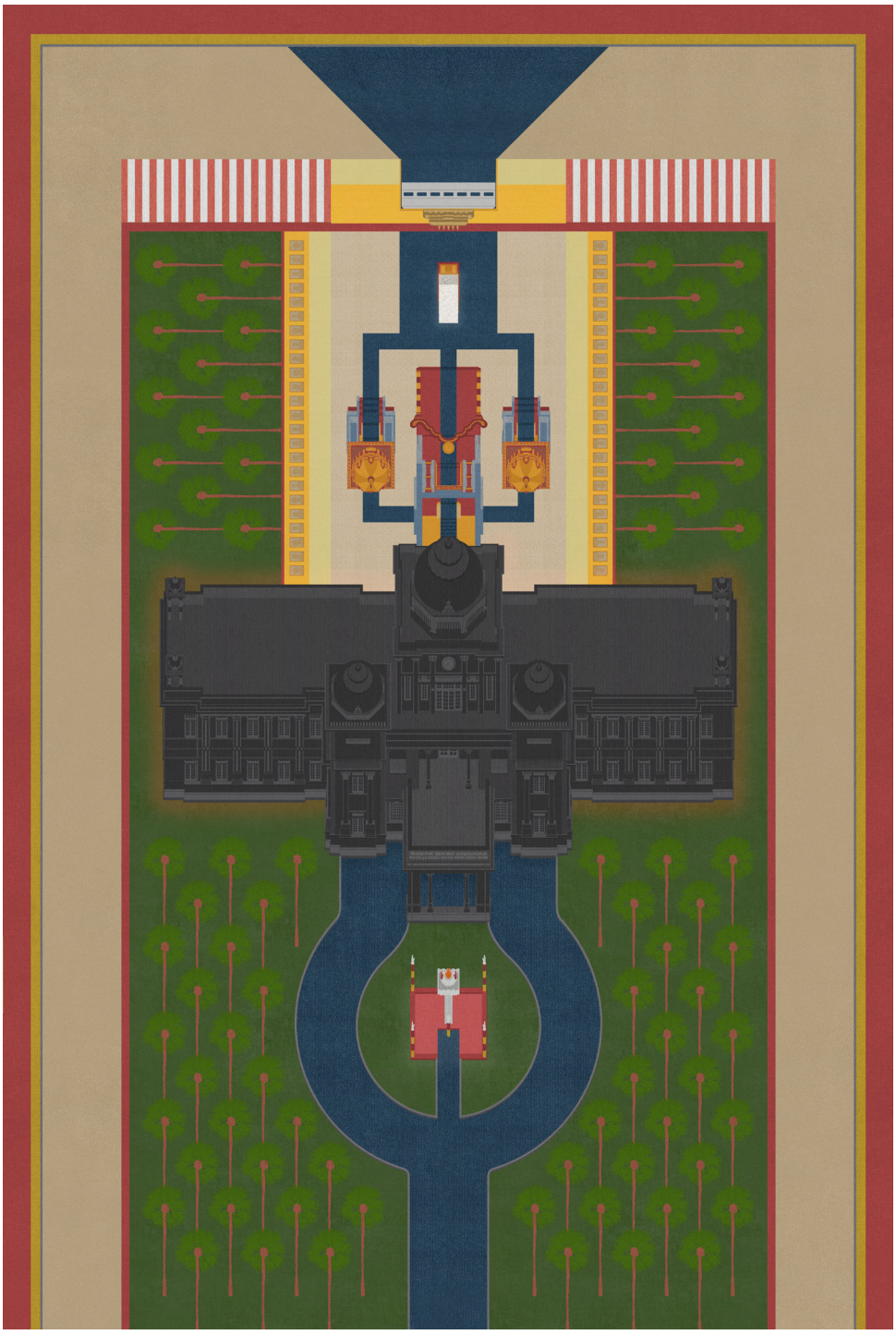


Fig. 20. Conclusion Frontispiece: *Our Home is Our Temple*

Home is Where I Belong

Conclusion

Nala awoke on his back,
In the river that had again receded to his ankles,
In his arms, he still held the miniature,
Its figure still in pristine condition.

Behind him stood ornate, metal gates,
Shut from the world beyond,
As the youth stood up, with the model in hand,
Finding Devi's temple ahead.

For Nala stood in front of Yalpanam’s library,
But its skin was tarnished in black,
As an aura of red burned around its body,
Emanating waves of primordial heat.

But it was not the library his eyes first saw,
But what stood burning in place of a throne.
For in front of the building, a memorial stood,
And in its arms a holy fire burned.

Nala quickly deciphered,
It was its smoke that they had followed,
As his eyes then trailed to the origin of the fire,
To find a woman in white praying to its mantle.



PUBLIC LIBRARY JAFFNA

And just as he was about to call to the woman,
She put out the fire of the memorial.
And without turning around, She began to speak,
As if expecting Nala's arrival.

"The library is clad in black, Nala,
As a reminder of the crime committed.
For it glows as it does to showcase the rage,
That still runs through the blood of your people."

"Welcome my child to my abode,
I am glad to see you are finally here.
Now tell me. Do you have an answer?
Have you found your temple, Nala?"

The youth looked into Her pale eyes,
Realizing he stood before the Goddess.
As he prostrated before the divine being,
That had sent him on this winding path.

"O Goddess, I do not know.
I fear I have found many temples along this journey.
Each one has brought me to closer to home,
But I do not know if I have found an answer."

The Goddess turned Her back to Nala,
And began to walk towards the library.
"Well then, my child, come with me,
And I will show you the temple you have sought."

Walking up the library's steps with the model,
The two took off their slippers at its doors.
As Nala noted the river too ascended these steps,
Traveling into the library's halls.

The Goddess and Nala then opened the doors,
Descending down another staircase,
As Nala then felt a familiar warmth,
At once realizing where he was.

For the two arrived from the doors,
Of the garbhagriha of his industrial temple,
As all along, just as the model had said,
The library was the youth's sanctum.

The river flowed through the sanctum,
Towards familiar vertical doors,
As all around, Nala could see,
The temple that had raised him to believe.

There was the familiar smell of sandalwood.
The familiar pipes that ran across ceilings.
But there was also the addition of photos on its wall,
Of all the people he had met and lost.

"*Nala, this is your temple.*
You always knew that this was the answer.
But what you did not understand was why,
You continued to be drawn to it."



"For this temple carries your stories,
Of what it means to be an Eelam Tamil.
The stories that you first learned,
When you marched your streets a decade ago."

"For ever since that first procession,
You have continued that protest in this temple,
As you learned the stories of who you are,
And what within you remains missing."

"For the stories that you learned,
Made you look at this altar anew,
For what once only held a divine presence,
Also became a repository of your people's past."

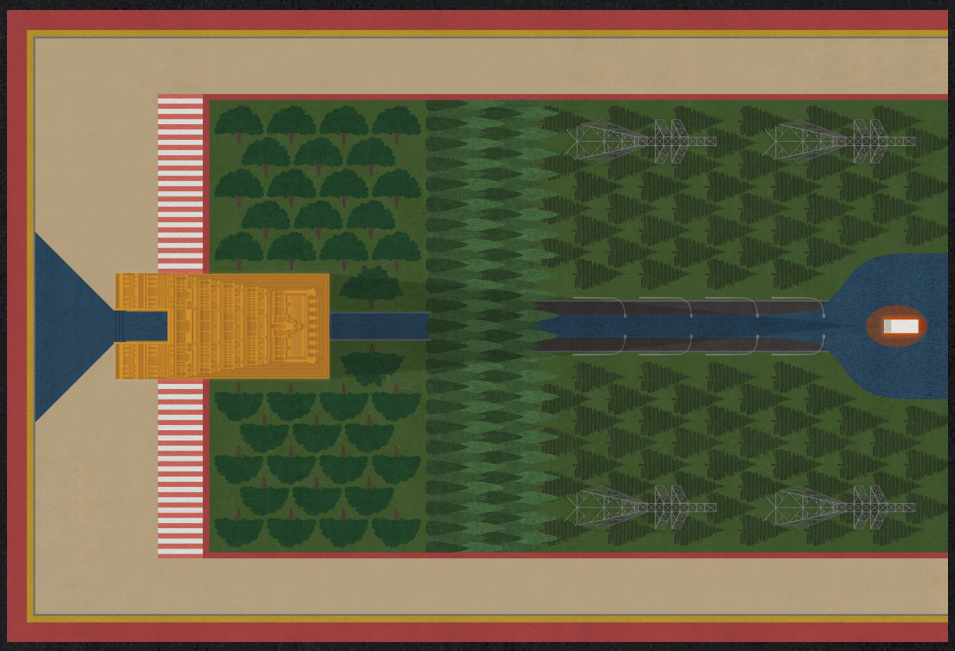
"When you now step towards your sanctum,
Nala, you see the wounds of your people.
You see Yalpanam's library burning within,
You see your people forbidden to remember."

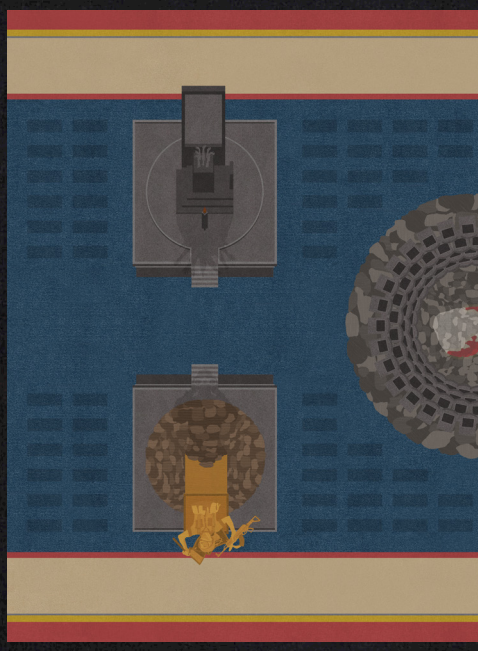
"For this temple for you is a memorial,
That forms your conception of home,
As you continue to return to its walls,
Because it is here where you feel belonging."

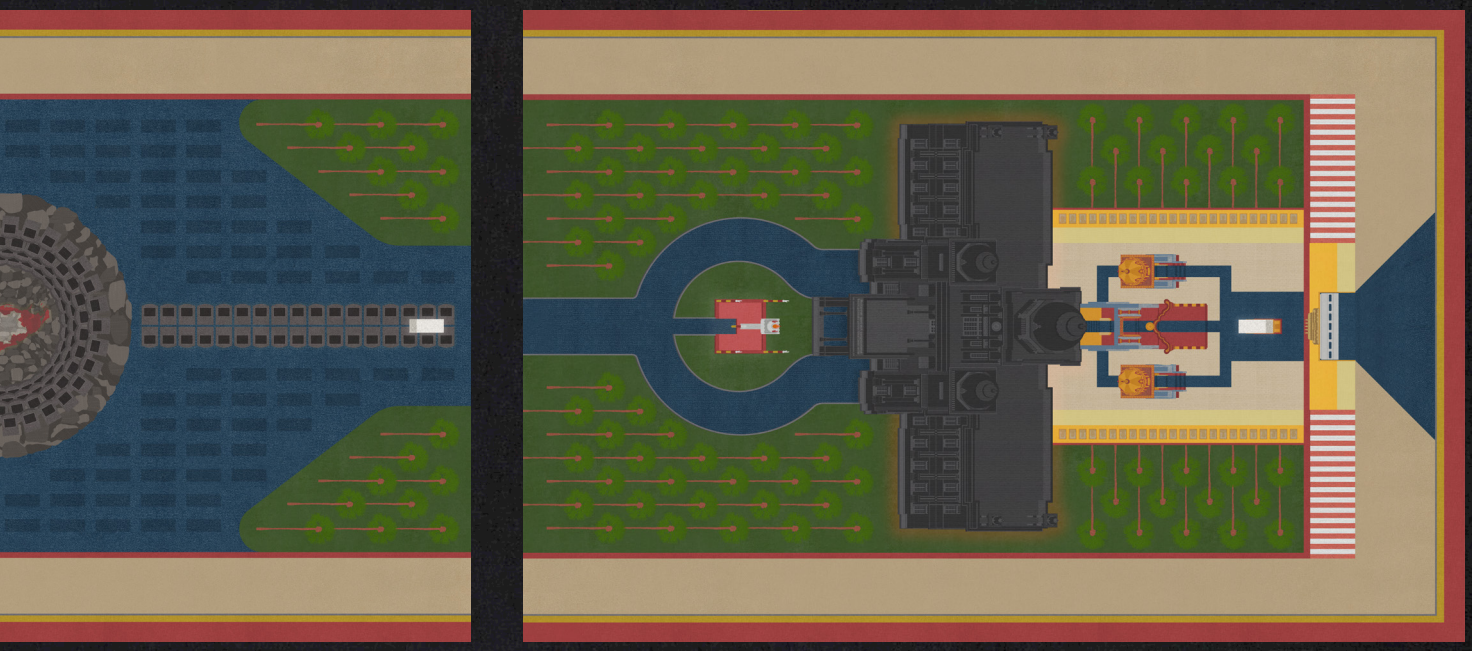
"For the model that you now hold,
I placed for you to arrive at this answer,
It is the spark that begins this cyclical journey,
Towards realizing that this is your home."

The Goddess then guided Nala,
Towards the temple doors,
Where the youth saw a familiar plinth,
Without a glass encasement atop it.

Nala, knowing what to do,
Placed the model to fill this absence,
And as he set the model into its place,
He saw his journey taking place within.







From the asokavana to the library,
Nala found his journey illustrated within,
Until suddenly his attention was interrupted,
By the familiar coo of a fowl.

"Nala, there is one last note I must make.
This is not the first time you completed this journey.
For you have traveled this pilgrimage many times before,
And so have all the children of the library."

"For whenever I see you are questioning your belonging,
I come to you all in your dreams,
For when home makes you churn, I will be there,
To guide you towards an answer."

"Come now and I will show you.
Come open your temple doors.
And you will begin the journey for yourself,
For when you return for your next voyage."

Nala then pried open the doors,
As the river spilled out of the temple,
As he looked below to see himself,
Being washed away again into the forest.

"Nala, understand that your home,
Will always be found in this temple.
And you may return to this journey,
Any time your faith wavers."

Nala looked ahead to see himself,
Awaking again in Devi's ashram,
Smiling as he turned around,
To thank the Goddess for Her guidance.

But instead Nala saw again the model,
Once more monumental in size,
Floating in darkness in his temple,
Eyeing him as its prey.

And at this, his vision was blinded,
Submerged by a sea of a black,
As the next moment the youth awoke,
Beneath a familiar warmth.

Our Home is Our Temple

Conclusion

The second-generation Eelam Tamil-Canadian ascends a journey when moving through their temple, where they learn the stories of their people, while also acknowledging how their history is being erased. This journey becomes a means of confronting their conception of home, realizing that for them no home exists that is not contested.

The architectural model offers them a channel to decipher this reality, as while every entrant goes through this journey, not all go through it aware. The question of home will always persist, if there is a home for this generation to return to, as this journey reveals whether such a home can ever truly exist. Home is then for this generation the journey towards what they cannot have, but also a calling and a reminder to continue fighting for belonging.

Home is just as *moksha*. It is where we as Tamils desire to return to, and while we are not promised it in this lifetime, its warmth is ever present within our temples. The procession is our journey home, and we will continue to embrace the sanctum, even if we find our stories burning amongst the holy's bed. As it is in the nature of our people, when we see such fire ahead, to not submit to its warnings, but to instead challenge its flames.

My generation will continue to circumambulate until we find what it is we desire, because to the children of the library, home is not giving up on the idea of home. Just as Nala has returned to this journey multiple times in his past, we will all continue to return to the model when our faith begins to waver.

To conclude, the Canadian-Hindu temple is then a map to ourselves. It is a manifestation of our identity, a combination of the Canadian and the Eelam Tamil. These temples, just as I, do not feel at home either in Sri Lanka or in Canada, but they still belong to both, and that is not contested. Inversely, just as the temple, within us lies an infallible model, and this artifact forms our soul, preserving our identity for eternity.

Onwards to Eelam

Epilogue

And as I spoke my last word,
It was as if I had broken from a spell,
But when I looked around, to find my thambi,
Not a soul was left in the temple.

I sat alone atop the temple floor,
Looking forward, towards the sanctum,
But what stood instead was the model.
Its glass reflecting my stare.

Walking towards the miniature,
It projected no longer the past or future.
Instead, I saw the world I once tread,
From the asokavana to my temple.

And at the very beginning stood a familiar youth,
As he approached a peacock on the opposing shore.
And at its coo, I knew what to do,
As I opened my temple's doors.

I then heard the screech of a hawk approach,
As I turned around, a smile forming over me.
To find Vibheeshana and amma atop it,
As the hawk settled to the ground.

Vibheeshana remained quiet,
His figure just as Hanuman had described.
And amma looked at me tenderly,
Just as she would before she passed.

Amma asked if I was ready for Eelam,
Holding her hand out to me.
I then looked to the model, and my thambi within,
And told her.

Let us wait a little longer.

A Continuing Journey

Afterword

A month prior to this piece's completion, I revisited Sri Varasiththi Vinayaagar, only to find its doors temporarily closed with a poster board stating it had moved.

In all my time with my temple, never had I found it closed to the public, and so I took this as a sign that another chapter had begun. As I entered the new temporary temple that sat adjacent to this lot, what I found was a transitional space significantly smaller in size. But what drew me to writing this passage was to note what was missing, as at its entrance the model I had obsessed over for years was no longer present.

I spoke with the head priest to ask what had become of the model, and whether it would return when the temple had been renovated. He told me that the renovation had no intention to house the miniature, that the temple sculpted beneath glass was no longer one they aspired to build. He would then continue to tell me that the model would still rest in their temple's storage, and as he ended our conversation, he seemed to imply there may be a future where it would return.

Beyond this development to the temple, there is much else that I began to confront as this piece reached its end. Whether it be the acceleration of Sinhalization across the Tamil homeland, or the Hindu temples of Eelam that were being torn and replaced by Buddhist temples, further



Fig. 24. Temporarily moved sign on garage doors of *Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar Hindu Temple of Toronto*



Fig. 25. New relocated transitionary temple for *Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar Hindu Temple of Toronto*

threads continued to emerge regarding where else Nala needed to explore, as well as the reality I would face when I finally met my mother's soil.[44]

Further, I began and continue to reckon with what this story spoke to my future as an architect, and how an epic that drew from a temple would shape my future ahead. The temple, the protest, and the library each claim its own unique, spatial domain, each organized to different codes but united in how they tell stories. It is as I reflect on this piece that I see the role of architecture as a stage, where its form provides a platform for stories to both exist and persist.

While the temple is explicit in how it tells stories, abiding to cosmic rules, the streets of the protest and the halls of the library each invite stories all the same. Regardless of their scales and the stories they were intended to capture, all architecture has the potential to be connected in order to unravel the perplexity of humanity. As an architect, I see our creations as a means to understand the world, where deciphering its rules and how it is used can reveal the eternal truths that dictate our lives. I walk from this piece with understanding that no architecture is mundane, and to the observant architect, one can see their history but also anticipate their future.

To conclude this reflection, Reader, I do not know if this piece has a resolution. It ends as a project of self-discovery, and I hope you leave searching for something similar. There is still much that I must learn, as well as a trip I need to take, and so the story of Nala will continue until I find the right words to say I am home.

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44 Srinivasan, Meera. "Tamils Flag Escalating Attacks on Temples in Northern Sri Lanka." The Hindu, April 23, 2023.



Fig. 26. Model within original transitionary temple of *Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar*



Fig. 27. Model missing from temporary transitionary temple of *Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar*

And so I shall end this work with a quote I found years ago, detailing a youth's reaction in the Toronto Star to the opening of Sri Ayyappa Samajam of Ontario. His words I have thought of since I first began this journey, and I hope it stays with you as it did with me.

Pranavan Ganeshalingam, a student at York University's Schulich School of Business, said the temple has helped bring him closer to his culture. The 19-year-old, whose parents are from Sri Lanka, volunteered all weekend with two dozen other friends."I've seen other temples, gone there too, but this one I've seen being built in front of me," said Ganeshalingam."I feel drawn to it." [45]

45 Aulakh, Raveena. "50,000 Celebrate New Hindu Temple." Toronto Star, September 8, 2009.

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Glossary

Aiyya	A form of Sir in Tamil; used to respectfully address elders and priests.
Agni	God of fire.
Akka	Older sister in Tamil (pronounced *uck-KA*).
Amma	Mother in Tamil (pronounced *um-MA*); also used to address Goddesses.
Angada	A vanara found in the Ramayana; son of Vali and prince of Kishkinda.
Anna	Older brother in Tamil (pronounced *un-NA*).
Appa	Father in Tamil (pronounced *up-PA*).
Asokavana	A grove of asoka trees.
Astra	A supernatural weapon imbued with spiritual powers.
Asura	A class of malevolent demons that seek power; oppose the Devas.
Ashram	A spiritual hermitage.
Atman	The eternal self that follows one across multiple lifetimes.
Bharat	The Sanskrit name for the Indian subcontinent; used within the story in reference to southern India.
Bhudevi	Goddess that is the personification of the earth, rescued by Vishnu in his Varaha avatar.
Charpai	A woven South Asian bed made out of a wooden frame and natural-fibre ropes.
Devaloka	The heavenly realm of the Gods and Devas.
Dharma	Truth, justice, duty.
Eelam	Or Tamil Eelam; a proposed independent state in Sri Lanka for the Tamil people comprised of parts of the Northern and Eastern provinces.
Garbhagriha	The Sanctum Sanctorum of a Hindu temple.
Gopuram	The tower superstructure that marks the entrance to a Hindu temple.

Glossary

Hanuman	God and vanara (see definition) that is a companion of Rama and loyal minister to Sugriva in the Ramayana.
Itihasa	The historical Epics of Hinduism that occurred during the lifetime of the narrator; comprised of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.
Kailash	Kailash or Mount Kailash; a mountain in the Kailash Range in the Tibetan Plateau that is recognized as the abode of Shiva, Parvati, and their children, Pillayar (Ganesha) and Murugan (Karttikeya).
Kanji	A porridge of rice and water.
Lehenga	An ankle-length skirt traditional to the Indian subcontinent.
Mahabharata	An itihasa that narrates the Kurukshetra War between the kingdoms of the Kauravas and the Pandavas.
Mahendra	A mountain range described in the Ramayana; from where Hanuman leaps to arrive at the shores of Lanka.
Mantra	Sacred words and/or phrases; in this context in Sanskrit.
Moksha	Liberation from the bodily world where the atman returns to the Supreme.
Mridangam	A double-sided drum traditional to South India and Sri Lanka.
Murti	A devotional idol of a deity or saint.
Nadaswaram	A double-reed wind instrument traditional to South India and Sri Lanka.
Nala	A vanara (pronounced *nuh-LA*) that created the bridge from Bharat to Lanka in the Ramayana; the son of the architect-God, Vishwakarman.
Palmyra	A fan-shaped palm tree native to Sri Lanka and various tropical regions in Asia and Africa.
Pradakshina	The rite of circumambulating in a clockwise direction around an image, relic, shrine, or other sacred object in Hinduism and Buddhism.
Rakshasa	See asura.
Rama	The seventh incarnation of Vishnu and protagonist of the Ramayana.

Glossary

Ramayana	An itihasa that narrates Rama's quest to retrieve the abducted Sita from Ravana in Lanka.
Ravana	The ten-headed rakshasa king of Lanka; antagonist of the Ramayana.
Rishi	An enlightened person that has completed severe penance.
Saraswathi	Goddess of knowledge, music, art, speech, wisdom, and learning, and a personification of the Saraswathi River; acknowledged throughout the story as the Goddess.
Sari	A garment, made of woven fabric, arranged over the body as a robe and traditional to the Indian subcontinent.
Shastras	Manuals and/or treatises in Hinduism.
Sita	The consort of Rama; abducted by Ravana in the Ramayana.
Smriti	That which is remembered; a class of stories attributed to an author.
Swarga	A heaven for righteous souls and the celestial home of the Devas.
Thambi	Younger brother in Tamil.
Valmiki	Sage and poet of the Ramayana.
Vanara	Forest-dwelling race of monkeys to which Hanuman belongs to.
Vayu	God of wind; father of Hanuman, granting him the power of leap.
Veena	A traditional, chordophone instrument from the Indian subcontinent. Specifically, the South Indian Saraswathi veena, a traditional lute in classical Carnatic music, is alluded to throughout the story.
Vetti	A type of sarong or cloth wrap for the lower body traditional to South India and Sri Lanka.
Vimana	The tower superstructure over the garbhagriha. It is similar in design to the gopuram, but traditionally smaller in size.
Yalpanam	Tamil name for Jaffna, the capital city of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka.
Yama	God of death and destruction.