

# A Hall of Mirrors

by Pireeni Sundaralingam

**Countries exist, not just as geopolitical entities on our planet, or colored areas on our maps, but as narratives and dreams. They are works of imagination and for those living in the diaspora, there is nothing so all-encompassing as the struggle for the form that such a country may take within one's imagination. It is as if we are ardent mourners at a funeral, competing over conflicting histories of the dearly departed.**

It is impossible to remain innocent. As we carom through our days, trying to hold onto one sane and sanctified version of events, we cannot help but meet others who are trying, with equal tenacity, to hold onto their own picture of history. We struggle, amid the rubble of time and memory, to find our own unique relics.

Tolstoy suggested that "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Perhaps we might argue that as discord creeps into our memories of a country, it makes each memory distinct in its own particular way. Civil war not only annihilates lives and societies, it destroys any semblance of a unified group narrative. It magnifies the social fractures in a society, deepening the distinction between genders, intensifying the cracks between different social classes, until the foundation of each experience is frost-shattered in its own unique way. And time and the distance of diaspora only serve to amplify such differences. Thus the memory of an exile follows its own uncalibrated trajectory, isolated and unchecked, each narrative creating its own ellipses in a carnival house of distorting mirrors.

As a writer struggling to chart the psychological landscape of the Sri Lankan diaspora, I cannot help but be aware of the vastly distinct tectonic plates bumping and grinding against each other in this variegated terrain. Two of the poems in which I explore this territory are enclosed below. The first (*Sri Lanka Calling*) examines the way in which the tranquility of peacetime notions such as "home" and "comfort" are effectively exploded by the exigencies of war: a much-loved family house can be recalled as the setting for card-games and birthday parties while, in reality, it has long-since been converted into a center for detention and torture. The past can no longer be considered a safe and deep-rooted entity. It fractures and transmutes. It is not just the past, however, that comes into contention. In the second poem enclosed here (*Patrimony*), we see two conflicting views of the present. Even as the narrator embraces the liberal values of the West, a second character in the poem seeks to deny the reality of this present in favor of a vision of patriarchal and nationalist fervor. Time and again, these voices give the lie to the assumption that memory, or even history, can remain a stable and unitary construct. The past, it seems, is not just another country but a fictional country at that.

## Sri Lanka Calling

— Boston, Massachusetts

In bright light we gather,  
plates chiming the lunchtime air.  
Ten past noon and the Sunday chicken  
floats piecemeal in its Wedgwood bowl,  
curried thighs, drumsticks, gravy,  
flesh sliding off the tender bone.

I sink bare feet into the carpet's graze,  
feel the pull of teenage joint and muscle,  
the growing ache beneath the toes.

We are ten, twelve, and thirteen faces,

gathered around the table's carousel  
while our guest grinds and swallows,  
tells news of our house back home: how  
the open sluice runs red and swiftly;  
how dawn trucks spill their trails  
of ankles, elbows; how the flesh  
slides so gently off the tender bone.

## Patrimony

— Los Angeles

A Buddhist monk sits in my room,  
anger rising round him like a cloud of flies.

Slowly, he unwinds the litany  
of my flaws: my close-cropped hair,  
my ringless hands, Western habits  
wrapped around me like a makeshift robe.

Deeper than words, his blood calls to mine,  
his voice forming spaces through which  
darker memories crawl:  
jasmine trees and incense sticks,  
army trucks at temple gates  
and the cock crowing at dawn.

Yet his eyes hold only present time.  
Dry hands buzzing, he reproves me  
for leaving the country he left  
and is still trying to find.