

Into the Kalari

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My mother and I begin our journey back,
carrying tonight's meal of *brinjal* and okra,
joking, chiding each other, we walk to

the British checkpoint.

Those pale, stern men
guard their post ever so diligently; day and night.
My baby brother waits at home.
We leave him because, with his innocent mouth he might say,

"When will it be safe enough for you to leave?"

"Who are you protecting us from?"

These questions would be found quite funny.
Rather than answer, and with demonic smiles,
they would complement his proficiency with
"The Queen's."

I refuse to speak it,
that unnatural language,
their treasured, posh, English.
When we practice in school
I can feel it

colonizing my teeth,
 taxing my tongue,
 stealing the labor of my gums.

Beaming at their progress, my schoolmates say just learning it makes them
 prettier and smarter and richer.

They go home to drink saffron tea, doctors promise it lightens their skin.

Seated in rows of ten, we await a lesson that can never come.

“You’ll see,” they turn to me and say,

“One of these days, they will teach us how to be white and beautiful like them.”

I have yet to hear their native word for one who hails from our sacred land.

I only hear
 street dog, curry-eater,
 jungle trash, river monkey.

With jeering, pompous voices,
 ‘proper’ accents,
 these men say to me,
 “Kerala was created with the rest of the world.”

I do not listen when they say such things.

I rush into my brother’s room
 and remind him of the truth,
 what Guru Ahimkara taught to our village, while calling us

Ende Ponne Kuttikal,

“my precious children”.

Our land was gashed out of the ripe Indian earth
 by Lord Parashurama, the incarnation of God Vishnu,
 who flung his axe in an act of wild emotion, splitting the sea itself!

My brother gasps, but not from amazement.
 He has, after all, heard this story before.
 He gasps on purpose,
 to remember what it feels like to be
 amazed by his identity,
 loved by his flesh.
 This feeling fades like lunar ambience.
 The moon seldom rises on the British empire.

When the daylight is gone
 I leave our quiet home, kiss my sleeping father,
 and disappear into the night.
 When I have arrived at the training room
 Guru Ahimkara stands at the door,
 waiting to begin our lesson.
 My family is indeed poor, and yet
 I still have an inheritance.
 My birthright is the sacred art
Kalaripayattu,
 Kerala's own battlefield strikes.
 The World's first martial art.

I walk into the *Kalari*.
 The topsoil is removed three meters.
 The walls are decorated with blades, daggers, staffs.
 A steel whip called an *Urumi*.
 A curved sword, a *Talwar*, a blade with which I share a name.
 "Talwar-*mohne*," Guru calls me.
 Talwar, the loved.

We begin with the hot oil massage,
a tradition passed down for centuries.
My joints turn mobile.
My spirit becomes free.

My opponent, Ramil, has been here since sunset.
Coming here is no secret for him.
He lives on the other side of the checkpoint.
His family is rich; his caste is holy.
I am told the Gods have made him better than me,
that he is made of gold.

We bow, and he shoots me a taunting grin.
I smile back.
I know that in this room, there is only one God.
The *Puttara*.
The deity of my ancestors.
The God of Kalaripayattu.

The British pray to a strange God,
who grants wishes like a genie,
and gives men strength for free.

Puttara does no such thing.
He watches us silently.
He gives us only cuts, bruises,
but his judgement is unspoken,
wordless,
fair.

Ramil selects the dagger.
He is three years my senior and this is his most skilled weapon.

The British Churches call pride a sin,
but I pick the dagger too.

Guru Ahimkara stands to the side.
He utters a brief incantation.
The room is filled with all the ancient magic of war.

There are few things more illegal than what we do on this golden night.
Our battle, our Kalaripayattu,
is banned by verdict of strange bureaucracy.
My culture is illegal in its own land.
Still, in this Kalari there is no law but ours.
Ramil and I lock eyes.
He mocks me with his gaze.
We await the order from Guru.

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SHIKAT!

BEGIN!

Ramil rushes my side
my defense is strong
Cling, Clang, Tish, Dwang
our blades collide a hundred times
we each have seven hands
I feel within me the rage of Shiva, The Destroyer.

Alas, I remember too late what Guru taught me,
that anger is a poison to the composed mind.
My duel is not destined to be long.

Ramil casts two slices to the bottom of my thigh.

How could I expect him to go that low?

He finishes with a kick to my stomach.

Hitting the ground

my skin and the dirt embrace each other.

Watching my fall, you could not tell where

body ends and where

ground begins.

I love the color of my skin.

It reminds me that I will return to this harvest earth

and become the soil my children will till.

I stand and look at Ramil.

He does not smile now.

His face bears a few licks and scrapes.

He is frustrated with the effort it took to finish me.

I have taught him a lesson.

Though he is made of gold, he still bleeds red.

Guru Ahimkara smiles at me.

It is time to go, and there is much training left for other nights.

My feet are calloused like those of the sages

who, even now, march for our freedom.

As the chariot of Surya, the Goddess of the sun,

makes its way across the horizon,

the hummingbirds practice their songs

adorned with wings of silk,

wings that shimmer twilight-pink and emerald.

I thank these first musicians,

who provided morning anthems to mythic warriors.

I envy their natural tone and effortless, honed craft.

These tiny avian virtuosos

who never doubt or notice their mastery.