

114 | breathe/swallow/feel

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I was about four at the time, eating lunch at my grandmother's home in Kandy. A local woman nicknamed 'Kos Amma' (*kos* is Sinhalese for jackfruit, *amma* is mother), sauntered into the house from the back verandah and asked for food, picking up some red rice from a dish with her fingers.¹

It was Kos Amma's way to carry a huge jackknife at her waist. Rumour had it that in a drunken stupor, she had stabbed her husband with the knife, then lit up a beedi and waited calmly for the police to arrive. I am not sure how much truth there was to this gossip or what I knew of it at the time, but when Kos Amma gatecrashed our meal, I was petrified. The rice that I was eating seemed to stick in my mouth. My beloved grandmother admonished Kos Amma for frightening me and hurried her out of the house.

The stilling of peristalsis and language in those thrilling, frightful moments attached themselves to red rice. For some time afterwards, whenever I ate it, the rice would catch in that space between mouth and oesophagus, speech and gut feelings.

a wretch²

Vapour trails of beedi and arak splish-splashing about her
she mounts the veranda in one shaky step
struts her saucy stuff to the table
giving each dish the once over.
A jackknife breathes at her tiny waist
a steely tongue, tipsy between redda and choli.

Aneh, Aneh she sings, rolling imaginary balls of yumminess,
wrist flicking them to her lips with the agility of a Kathakali.
Lusty and playful, she fingers the mound of red rice.
She finds me then, eyes bulging, mouth full, utterly star struck.

¹The opening story is taken from a longer piece in Y. Gunaratnam, *Death and the Migrant: Bodies, Borders, and Care* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

²*Mata budagini*: I am hungry

Athi: Enough

Hari rasi: Very tasty

Aiyo Baby, she whines, *Mata budagini*.
My grandmother leaps, shooing her away. *Athi!*

Cackling backwards into sunlight, Kos Amma has finished
her game of casting for big fish with small bait.
Granny's not risking it, she hurls
the fingered rice to the birds, mock spits *thoo thoo*
hoping to parse the devilled shadow.
Too late! Evil Eye or not, young flesh is impressed.

Kos Amma's magnificent, maleficent magic finds an open seam
to smuggle a keepsake to fly with me across oceans
a digestive ode held in buds, pores and folds
poised to flood my mouth at the smell of red rice
a breathtaking comet, carrying me back and back and back
A mischievous gag from the nimble old hag. *Hari rasi!*

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