

A Brief History of Hunger

The sky snakeroot smoke and rasping—a terrible light swallowed the village. Up close: monsters of dirt, without number. Their wings sickled and shining: fairies rapacious, red red. They sheathed the cedars and barley fields ash yellow. Soon we could see neither land nor sky. We bolted the windows: the Teeth of the Wind kept us quiet in the dark. At dawn we discovered they could not open their wings soon enough. The village was unleashed upon them. In burlap sacks, fishing nets, amkhoras, wedding shawls we gathered the unblessed harvest like dowries. We poured them into the boiling pots, plucked their devil heads—their faces so like our amas’—and wings and legs into a pile of dinner for the cats and stray dogs and crows. We fried what remained in burnt ghee until they crunched between our teeth. We ate them, each one now the size of a girl’s finger, dipped in wild honey. We smoked them in bamboo skewers for the tree-bone season. Where did they come from? Where were they going? They knew only hunger. They ravaged the leaves as though they had to pass through all the green on the land to get to the other side. But we, too, knew hunger. If we waited for the gods, come winter we would be hurling our lambs and newborns into the same ravine. So we spared no needle no blade no sky no angel. Akhes prophesied they’d return after twelve years, but we never saw them again. That summer we turned famine into feast. For nine days we ate nothing but what had come to eat us. That hunger lives in our blood now and our children’s and their children’s—and it will not stop until the last green is cut.

X

No Rhododendron

They came unarmed. They came
half-masked. They came
before the crow. They came
with the moon. They came
moonless. They came
out of rain. They came
as their enemy. They came
wearing our sons' scarves. They came
smiling.

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They slaughtered the goats. In burlap sacks, they gathered the batteries pressure cookers
hunting rifles khukuris flashlights madals dampus transistor radios. *For your freedom.*
They burned the books. They plucked the prayer bells from the lintels. They disappeared
into the needlewoods.

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They said People. They said Equality. They said One house, one soldier.

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They parceled up his fingers in the paper containing his feature
article and left it on the editor's desk.

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They took my child from school while I was planting cane cuttings. Three days
later, we found his clothes flung up in a sacred fig tree. His naked body buried
to the neck under the bridge. Green leaves wreathed his head. One eye was open.

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You sheltered the enemy of the state.

You mean *your* enemy? we didn't say.

You fed terrorists.

Like *yourselves*? we didn't say.

You're the enemy of the state.

They forced themselves into the house.

So they came.

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They drank the milk tea I had made for my swami. He never returned. They tied my baba's hands with his own trousers. He never returned. *Not even an eyelash will be missing.* My sani never returned. My mutu was studying for his district-level finals. He never returned. *We just want to have a small talk with you.* We never—

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We couldn't tell whether they were Those-Who-Make-You-Disappear
or Those-Who-Walk-at-Night.

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They said No red scarves. They said No pointing at the stars. They said
No rhododendron.

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They made him whet the khukuri on a rock. They tied him to the hog plum
tree with his scarf in the middle of the playground. They handed the khukuri
to a former student. The commander barked. He stood cane-still. The commander
barked. He stood cane-still. The commander barked. He swung. The tree fell.
Red veined the bark. *If anyone touches the body—*

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The vermillion blackened on my hair parting is a metaphor
for the vermillion blackened on my hair parting.

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They made my nana say what they wanted to hear with a water heater live wire.
They recorded her voice with her phone. They drank our homemade spirit. Then
they—

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Anyone seen in the moonlight will be shot on sight!

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They made him dig the hole. They scooped his kneecaps with a broken
Coca-Cola bottle and buried him.

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The sugar in the tea you're drinking now came from the same field.

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You who plucked the full moon from my forehead show me
where to dig.

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Crows tore the sky.
No one went near the plum stump.
A stray bitch kept guard.

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They washed their hands in the mouth of the Mikli-Phoom.
They drank the Mikli-Phoom from their clean cupped hands.

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We returned to our bonded labor. We set the field on fire. Through
the night we cut the burning canes.

In a Time of Revolution

- X At the checkpoint when they ask you where you're coming from, say *Home*.
- X When someone asks you where you live, point at the neighbor's house.
- X After football, when the goalie says *The king gunned down the king!* don't join the chorus of *Vishnu incarnate! He'll never die!*
- X Never wear red.
- X Never wear GoldStar.
- X At sundown, unplug the landline.
- X Before bed, leash the dogs.
- X Practice praying on your knees.
- X If we're not home by midnight, go to the neighbor's house.
- X Never exit the house without a butter lamp burning at Bodhisattva's feet and your student ID.
- X When someone asks you doesn't your ama teach Social Studies at the Secondary, say *No, she shucks fire-roasted corn at the bazaar.*
- X If you find our bed empty when you wake up, don't go to the police.
- X Practice praying still.
- X Bolt the windows before listening to the radio.
- X Never carry your textbooks in a OnePolar backpack.
- X Never carry a book with a red sheath.
- X If you see us being led away by two boys on the street, think *They're my neighbor's parents.*
- X When a soldier points the rifle at your heart *Don't you know this is the curfew hour?* and takes his sweet time with the frisk, look at the stars and think *His hand is my hand.*
Think *I'm searching myself.*
- X Practice praying prostrate.
- X If we aren't back after a week, call the *Kathmandu Post*.
- X When you hear coming from a window *We've a letter for you from your apa,* keep walking.
- X Bury the batteries beneath the persimmon tree.
- X Burn the OnePolar backpack.
- X When someone at school asks you what your apa does, remove your beanie to show the shaved head.
- X Practice praying with open eyes.
- X When someone asks you what you believe in, don't say *The street dogs that have stopped barking.*
- X Never draw the curtains when there's still light.
- X At the checkpoint when they ask you where you're going, say *Home*.

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The year the war ended, I swallowed nine bodhi seeds and left my fatherland.
Yam between two boulders. Vultures. Fatherless—Oh bereft my fatherland!