

Senthuran Varatharajah

Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen

Before the Signs Mount Up

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Valmira Surroi

03:28

The day after her high-school graduation party, my sister asked me if I wanted to visit her students with her. She was sixteen when we watched a TV documentary about a family; it was called *Wadim*, like the family's oldest son. We stood in the living room and after we'd folded the clothes and put them in plastic bags my mother said it was a cycle – in the old days we'd got everything we wore from others and now we were passing our things on. Through the fence I saw three girls playing hopscotch in the yard. They had come across the Mediterranean, Yara's mother said later in the shared kitchen. It was supposed to take six days from Alexandria to Italy and it took twelve; no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land. We drank Syrian anise tea and I was looking at the pieces of walnut floating on the top when Yara sat down next to me and told me she could write and asked me if I wanted to see. She picked up one of the pads we'd brought them and she wrote her name in it, she wrote it on the line. Her fingertips didn't look like her mother had ground them down. We gave them pens as well, a

pack of fineliners like the ones Auntie Elisabeth and Uncle Wilhelm gave me; fingerprints grow back after two or three weeks. Yara said she'd be allowed to go to school soon; my sister had taught her how to write. We stayed two or three hours and when we went to leave they hugged and kissed us. Yara meant *little butterfly*, she said. She clenched her fists and placed them together on the thumb side, and she moved them up and down to show me her name.

Senthil Vasuthevan

03:44

at the beginning of june, just after i got back from new york, i went to istanbul for a week with my younger brother. i went with him to a conference where he presented a chapter of his phd on the tamil genocide. our hostel was in beyoglu, on the european side of the city, in the shadow of the galata tower. istanbul had hardly changed since my last visit two years ago, at least the parts we were in, and yet it was a different place that showed itself: there was a different absence in the voices of the children selling kleenex on taksim square, there was a different exhaustion in the faces of the people waiting on the pavements of istiklal caddesi, in the realm of that night, outside the locked gates of the swedish embassy. a family, they might have been a family, sat against the white wall, the parents with their backs leaning on it, the heads of two sleeping children on the lap of the presumed mother. next to the man, to the left of his knee – he sat with his legs crossed – a syrian passport was splayed like an open eye; the sunlight had faded the photo. he put his forefinger on the plastic laminating the pages to stop it falling closed. my brother had taken an arabic course at the beginning of his

degree. when we stood facing them he didn't know what to say. what remained was the silence, in which he was silent; to which they returned. we gave them the water bottles and simits we'd bought before from a street hawker, and the lira we possessed.

Senthil Vasuthevan

03:58

on the promenade demarcating one part of kadiköy, shielded by rocks, he told me, en passant as if remembering widely known facts, that our aunt, an older sister of my mother's, had been stuck in istanbul for several months without papers on her way here. in the photo i showed you two days ago she's the girl on the left by the child with his right arm resting on the table.

she's been living in germany for nearly twenty years, forty-two kilometres away from our parents; she has a permanent residency permit now. she holds a travel document for stateless persons, a kind of ersatz passport; the blue of her papers and the red of our passports divides us into two territories. eminönü and beyoglu were spread out ahead of us, divided by the bosporus and linked asphalt-grey by the galata bridge. the minarets of the hagia sophia and the blue mosque on the hill at fatih were visible in the distance, as were fishing boats at our feet putting over to the asian side, and container ships floated on the black sea, only apparently small and immobile, like pieces on a board game; the steel not dazzling. my brother climbed onto a rock, onto the split in the stones, and photographed the scenery with his iphone. he held the display up in front of me and i saw on it the reflection of my face, almost black from the backlight of the sun. an elderly man sat on a bench in front of the breakwaters. his stall – he

sold balloons, pastel-coloured, dangling on strings, tied between two wooden rods – was fastened into the gaps between the rocks. i knew nothing about this connection. i didn't know that something, someone connected me to this city even before i knew it. there seem to be places that don't disappear – not even if they've been left without ever being entered.

Valmira Surroi

04:14

The morning after our arrival, my father woke me. We took a bus and on the way he looked out of the window and didn't say a word. I didn't know where we were going. Axha Granit and my father had known each other since their first semester. Later on he got engaged to my aunt, an older sister of my mother's who had worn a blue dress with white polka dots the last time we'd been to the market here in Prishtina. Her name was Jehona and the first time you wrote *Jehova* I read her name, they're only one letter apart, you know that, you know which one it is. I stood next to her as we watched the fishmonger bashing the fish on the head and cutting their bellies open with a single motion, and he took out their whitish guts, which the other fish ate.

Valmira Surroi 04:22

On the fence next to the missing signs were plastic roses attached by tiny wires, and there were dried flowers too. My father stepped up to every single picture, stood in front of every face, and I stood behind him. I can barely remember the time before we left. Only fragments are left. I remember the black pupils looking at me, and I reached for

my aunt's hand and it was warm. When I got fixed braces on my teeth I couldn't move my mouth for two days, and when the orthodontist had asked me at the previous appointment what colour I wanted the brackets to be, I said I wanted red. I didn't start to talk about it with my parents for a long time. They never spoke when my sister or I were nearby, and when we entered a room they fell silent or they started talking about our school. They only started talking about it gradually. They started to talk about how walls were put up in classrooms and morning and afternoon lessons were introduced to separate Serbian children from Albanians, they started to talk about how only Serbian was allowed to be spoken and taught at schools and universities, and how policemen came into the rooms of the art faculty and cut up the pictures with a single motion, they came without warning. *Keshtu filloi*, that's how it started, they said. When Albanian students and professors had to leave the university they gradually began holding lectures in private homes. Axha Granit and my father gave seminars in their supervisor's house. They spoke Albanian and they had fewer and fewer students.

Valmira Surroi

04:30

Perhaps one of them was on the fence or tacked to the tree alongside it, and perhaps my father didn't recognize him. The photos and computer print-outs were laminated or put in transparent plastic pockets, and underneath them were their names and dates of birth and the place and date when they were last seen; I could barely make anything out. The weather had corrugated the paper and smudged the writing and their faces. Their colours ran together and the flesh

they left behind was blue and red and green and purple, and none of the faces were recognizable as faces. You can paint a mouth as if it were a split right across the face, and it's still reminiscent of a mouth.

Senthil Vasuthevan

04:38

in the mid-fifties the parliament in sri lanka, which was called ceylon at the time, passed the official language act no. thirty-three of nineteen fifty-six, also called the sinhala only act, which replaced english, the official language since the colonization by the british in eighteen fifteen, with sinhala. tamil is the native language of a third of the population. even now justice is largely dispensed in sinhala. even now the sri lankan army shapes jaffna's cityscape.

Valmira Surroi

04:43

Ismail said that the three letters Q, X and W were banned in Turkey after Atatürk introduced Latin script.

They only occurred in the Kurdish alphabet, not in Turkish, he said. They are only banned in Kurdish. The letters are on every keyboard, he said.

Senthil Vasuthevan

04:46

when you mentioned the domes on the national library on the first day, i looked at the photos google showed me, pictures next to pictures and beneath pictures, scattered across my monitor. they reminded me of the domes on the roof of jaffna's library, which i also know only from the internet; no dull light would fall from those

domes onto your hands, even now since their reconstruction; they aren't made of glass. thirty-two years ago, before they and the ninety-five thousand books and palm-leaf manuscripts inside it were burned, it was the largest library in asia. i read on wikipedia that a hundred thousand albanian books and the fittings in the reading rooms had been destroyed, the books perhaps lying open next to your parents' notes, the chairs they might have sat on and even the grain of the wood they ran their fingers along; you know that. my father says, over the two days for which the library burned, the tamils lost their language and their memory. no one remembers any more, he says. and we remember nothing either.

Senthil Vasuthevan

04:53

in my parents' photo albums, there is a sheet of plastic over every page on which the pictures are carefully arranged next to pictures and beneath pictures with statements on place and date, a sheet of plastic to protect them from damage by touch. one of them – i took it out one night when i didn't call a name and no one had called my name into me, and until the end i didn't remove the folded strips of tape stuck to the back, at the rounded corners, four pieces in all – one of these pictures not under a sheet shows my brother, his back, the back of his head, the crown of his hair. he's sitting on my father's motorbike, both hands on the handlebars and on this side of the wall divided in the middle by a red-brown line; horizontal, a hand's width. the house it surrounds belonged to my parents. our father had already left it. in the right rear-view mirror – the left was cut out of the picture – two women are not clearly visible but hinted

at, and they filled it the way they stood on the veranda side by side; perhaps they looked different to my brother; perhaps they were clearly visible to him; perhaps he saw their faces, their bodies and the clothes they were wearing, in the mirror, and perhaps my aunt, my father's younger sister, and my mother – i must have been inside her belly by that point – were only shadows in the picture i lost long ago, shadows that saw him and measured him up with their eyes, his back, the back of his head and the crown of his hair.

Valmira Surroi

04:59

The first time I heard the story of Lot and his wife at school, I asked myself why I hadn't turned into a pillar of salt, back then.

My parents say I didn't speak for two months.

I looked back too.

Valmira Surroi

05:12

There's a photo on my timeline, the one from yesterday evening, you'll see two shadows on it, cast onto grass. Their legs were long and they reached far across the middle of the picture, which the left one of them might have taken, the one whose arms look bent as though they were holding a camera in front of their chest. During their studies, Axha Granit and my father were part of a group of students who documented witness statements. They came from the surrounding villages and they began to tell their stories; nothing was to be lost, everything had to be written down, my father said, everything. When he drove me to the station a few days ago, he told me about a woman who'd come to him and spoken about a little girl;

she had raised her hand in class with two fingers up, the first and second fingers spread slightly apart. Her teacher had seen the victory sign. My father took his right hand off the steering wheel and he too spread those two fingers as he talked about her during the drive; she had been arrested in the classroom. Axha Granit and he often sat with friends in the Grand Hotel in the evenings, and he said he couldn't recognize the faces of the people sitting opposite through the smoke, and he said he's never seen Axha Granit's face again. We only have this one picture of him. We only have this picture, and I can't tell you which of the two shadows is him and which is my father.