

# An Ecology of Dance

By Prathna Lor

My mother doesn't know I'm writing this story, even though she is the one who asked me to write it. I'm no longer sure if I can call it a story. I'm not quite sure what it is that I'm trying to see. Off in the distance, some interior jungle planted by another me. There's a hand there that moves. Along scored bark and prescient napalm. It hovers over the writing hand. It is the writing hand that guides me. The music of an overbearing distance—

Do I match its gesture? Does it sway like I do? Or is it merely a double? Which one of us hears the echo, I wonder?

I must begin. So I begin in the telling. And I begin in the telling although it doesn't feel like it's mine to tell or hold. But she insists. She spends most of her day discussing, gawking, hurrying. Maybe she's tired of the memories—she wants to forget. Her memory is immaculate. But now she wants me to be the one to remember. Luck or guilt. You take your chances. No one seems to want to embrace the disappearing. Put it in your little book, she says. They were pushed out into the jungle years ago, you see, by the thousands. The cities were emptied; they were forced into verdant dark. I ask for the remnants, and they come out of time. The stories are dislodged and incomplete.

*Was I dreaming?*

*You never sleep in the jungle.*

I'm reminded of horrors that aren't mine. But there's freedom in the wake of slumber; and things happen, yes, along the rhythm of fear.

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I'm halfway there—in the midst. I'm carried by premonition. When I was dead, I knew my names. I kept the records. I welcomed the many. You can't hear the children weeping now. You find it impossible to imagine. Impossible to imagine that your own would take up arms against you. In a different life, you would have wilted. Or perhaps you would've been one of them? I count myself lucky. How easy it is to be charmed by language, I suppose. What was it that labour promised? What did liberation spell? I'm pushed out of my mind because I'm trying to see. Promises. I've been unable to keep. I'd rather be this misfortune. Wretched and exiled. I'd rather be down in the heaps of dung, scattered in the mud. Unmemoried. Rotting but not rotten. Why would I dare to dream otherwise?

Is it worse to bear the guilt? Or to know that you'll never feel guilty at all?

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My mother used to dance for the king. Her hands still bend backwards in imitation of an *apsara*—a heavenly dancer. I don't ask her if she remembers, but I'm convinced I inherited the movements, the gestures. I'm nimble enough to slip through the speech where I await the arrival of a future self. I'm listening for the fissures that make the everyday sing.

I want to disappear in the immortal time of the novel. With each line, with each saying, I'm haunted. Who, or what, am I bringing back from the dead? From the crevices of anticipation. There's a reason we tell stories. And a reason we don't. You never know who else wants to come along for the ride.

A great gesture is made of spreading.

For so long, I had communed with strangers. There were names I couldn't recall, and burdens I couldn't bear. But I had wrangled their voices into something I thought I could manage. I thought I could let these voices take flight. But it's becoming impossible to distinguish the texture. I need a steady hand to be able to sort through it all.

The dirt is our recordkeeper. But the roads are now smoothed out. The lakes and ponds filled in. Our dead bury the dead. These buildings are just more tombstones. Nation-sized tombstones. They bring in the work, the monuments, the flattening—bewildered by an itinerant scratching. Imagine: the mass grave of capital, stepping into it.

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A name can be barely worn, replaced with kisses, and rubbing fingers. Two pressed lips can direct you toward febleness or fortitude.

I'm sitting under a green plum tree, my back against a chain fence. My father is sitting across from me on a tree stump. Behind us, the rushing waters come crowding up over the land.

"This used to be all ours," my father says. He shakes his head in what seems like disbelief. Or is it regret?

When my parents fled, their homes and land were left unoccupied. My mother doesn't know what happened to her home. Everything had been stolen. In my father's case, it was distant family who came to take it. We'd been gone for decades; and it's not that we want the land back. I'm not quite sure what my father is feeling or trying to say.

There is a man here. Although we are distantly related, he is a stranger to me. Perhaps an uncle or my father's distant cousin? The language is lost on me. It is strange to hear him talk about this land that he knows used to be my father's. He didn't speak.

"Yes, we had come. This, that was yours."

We'd become lost to them. I wonder if we can still recognize each other. Or if we'd merely learned to inherit the disfiguration of kin.

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What is the time of any kind of writing? And here I do not mean that space of fantasy between the literary image and its awakening, such as when a horse or jasper enters into a mouth as a thought. Not the mere pleasure of imagining or entering a world whose life is already made. No, there is something much more frightening, more detailed, extremely itinerant within the space of a book in which you find yourself nowhere and total. I want to enter that succulent thing one calls fascination. There is a morbid intimacy for which I find myself hungry. To die by the letter is my only safeguard, my only reprieve. How else to describe that place, that stubborn locus, of that pesky thing one calls the universal? What does the philosopher say about the line? It matters not; I do not care.

Reposing, a riposte, a flattened wave, a combustible, a planet in fall, a degradation, a must, a litany, a syncope, a running away, a toon, a virgin, a seismic, a catch-all, a nuisance, a timidly, a fool, asymmetry.

I am rearranging the pearls of my youth.

I was allowed to think once.