



Le Centre communautaire des femmes sud-asiatiques

Inside this issue:

Typhoon Disaster Relief	1
Centre Update	2,3
Sunila Abeysekera	4,5
Sri Lanka's Unfinished War	6
My Brown Face- Mira Jacob	7-9
Calendar	10

TYPHOON DISASTER IN THE PHILIPPINES

The recent typhoon disaster that has devastated areas of the Philippines, caused thousands of deaths and left disaster and tragedy in its wake has personally affected our sisters and their families in PINAY, the Filipino women's organization in Montreal. Evelyn Calugay, a founder of Pinay has close family in the region and lost a nephew in the storm. Evelyn's son, Joey Calugay of the Immigrant Workers' Centre is a close friend and ally of SAWCC. We extend our sincere condolences to Evelyn and her family and all our Pinay sisters at this sad and tragic time. We also extend our solidarity and support to them and encourage people to contribute whatever they can to the relief. It has been suggested to send contributions to Migrante Canada. They will issue tax receipts for amounts of \$20 and above. Read details below. Migrante is an organization with grassroots links on the ground in the affected areas, and the assistance will go there directly.

The 'Sagip-Migrante Fund Drive' is aimed at gathering financial support for victims of the recent devastating super-storm Haiyan (locally called Yolanda). Funds will be in support of rescue missions, distribution and delivery of essential goods such as rice, canned goods and bottled water, setting up of soup kitchens and other relief missions in affected areas in the Visayan region.

You can donate through **PayPal** with the link below

[CLICK HERE TO DONATE TO PAYPAL](#)

Donations may be also deposited to Migrante Canada:

VanCity Account #: 663682 Branch 3

Or to Sagip Migrante's bank account.
Account name: Migrante International
Bank of the Philippines Islands, Kalayaan Branch
Savings Account No. 1993-0859-16
Swift Code: BOPIPHMM

Relief goods may also be sent to Migrante International's Home Office: #45 Cambridge St, Cubao, Quezon City.

Charitable tax receipt may be provided upon request for donations over \$20.00. Please email migrantecanada@gmail.com for more information.

Please circulate this email to your network

Qu'en pensez-vous?

What do you think?

- Let us know your thoughts about the bulletin.
- Que pensez-vous de notre journal?
- We encourage you to send in your stories and articles for upcoming newsletters in any language by the 25th of every month to: **adisun3@gmail.com**

• Écrivez - nous à

adisun3@gmail.com

CENTRE UPDATE



Centre Hours

Monday & Thursday 9am—9pm

Tuesday, Wednesday & Friday 9am—5pm

The Centre is wheelchair accessible

Le centre est accessible aux fauteuils roulants.

NOTE: Center will be closed from 23rd December to 3rd January (inclusive)

Membership

Have you renewed your membership this year? If not, you can do so by sending the fees to SAWCC.

Volunteers

If you are interested in helping out at the Centre, please contact Homa (Ext. 102 or homa@bellnet.ca) to coordinate a meeting!

VOLUNTEERS!

SAWCC is looking for volunteers to help with **the website** as well as **the library**. For more information please contact the volunteer coordinator Homa at 514-528-8812 Ext. 102 or homa@bellnet.ca

SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH (SAY)/JEUNES SUD-ASIATIQUES (JSA)

SAY has been having very eventful weekly meetings this past month! We kicked off November with a huge BANG— quite literally. Before our usual evening meeting the center lost a light from its ceiling, landing very loudly next to one of our members. This led to the fire department being called and our meeting had to be cut short. However, SAY members bonded over the event, even having a chance to tape up the crime scene together.

If you want to join in on SAY's weekly meetings or for more information about SAY, our upcoming programming, to inquire about our Basis of Unity, or just to say "hi" feel free to email us at say.jsa@resist.ca



AUTONOMUS AND INDEPENDENT EXHIBITION—A SUCCESS!

SAWAI (South Asian Women: Autonomous and Independent) Project had their exhibition on the theme of gender equality on the 22nd of November in Parc Extension. SAWAI has been running its programs, workshops and training sessions from Parc Ex and Cote des Neiges since 2006. SAWAI Programs' focus for the years 2012 and 2013 was *GENDER EQUALITY* issues. A set of 10-12 workshops was designed and facilitated by the SAWAI staff team to raise gender issues in the South Asian community. These workshops were interactive and included use of arts and crafts, drama and written expression. The participants of the workshops learnt and shared gender issues and the contributions of women in the society.



The exhibition was a display of participants' learning experiences, their achievements and their thoughts. It showed their willingness to improve their lives and their wishes of a better future for their next generations.

The exhibition was attended by a huge crowd and included participants, residents of the area, other organizations, Dr. Chirgwin of CSSS de Parc Extension; Madam Mary Desros, City Councilor of Parc Extension; Mr. Amir Khader, MNA; Madame Diane Du Sablon, Adjointe speciale Hon. Irwin Cotler, and Madame Elena Muñoz-Bertrand, Conseillère en Partenariat MICC.

The spectators of the exhibition enjoyed it and commended SAWCC's work and effort.



Come to a SAWCC Executive Council MEETING!

All Executive Council (EC) meetings of SAWCC are open to all members. We encourage you to attend, participate and be involved. It's a great way to learn of new initiatives and make a tangible contribution to the organization. There are no EC meetings held in December. The next EC meeting will be on *Monday 13th January 2014*. We arrive at 6pm, share some food and the meeting starts at 6:30pm.

SAWCC at ESTATES GENERAL ON QUEBEC FEMINISM (Dolores Chew)



SAWCC participated in the Estates-General on Quebec feminism in November 2013. This year the theme of the meeting was "Réaliser notre projet féministe de société- Allons Y!" (Let's achieve our feminist project for society). It was a great opportunity to discuss many key issues and work to promote resolutions that recognize inclusivity. It also gave us the opportunity to work on alliances with other women of diverse origins – including some we already work with in the 8th March Committee of Women of Diverse Origins, as well as groups we were not in touch with earlier -- and form important networks. There was an atmosphere of collaboration and support.



Remembering the 6th December massacre at Ecole Polytechnique

and re-affirming our commitment to end violence against women

JOIN US!

A sharing of thoughts, poems, texts

WHEN: Saturday 7th December, From 1-3pm

All welcome



SAWCC'S 2013 YEAR END PARTY

ਬਖ਼ਤਰ ਮਾਸਤਰ ਪਾਰਟੀ سال کے آخر پارٹی वर्षांत पार्टी ஆண்டு இறுதியில் கட்சி

Pot-luck style lunch – everyone's encouraged to bring a dish to share

Join us for an afternoon of lovely friends, fun and games, yummy food and a spectacular show of some great local talent

Celebrate the year of struggles and successes, individual & community

Sunday 15 December

1-4 pm

GEDA

2515 rue Bellisle

(metro Lionel Groulx)

If there are children interested in performing contact Naila: alidina_n@hotmail.com

In Remembrance- Sunila Abeysekera (1952-2013)

Sunila Abeysekera was a prominent human rights advocate who sought to bring the world's attention to myriad acts of violence in her country, Sri Lanka, despite threats against her own life.

She was a single mother and a lesbian, and also a champion of women's rights throughout South Asia, working for reproductive rights and economic parity and to end violence against women.

She was a member of Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority, but she refused to take sides in the country's long, brutal civil war, and repeatedly demanded that both sides be held accountable for their actions.

"There is also an element of racism and neocolonialism involved in the West's lack of interest in the Sri Lankan situation," she told the *Unesco Courier*, a United Nations publication, in 1999. "If one white person had been abducted or killed in Sri Lanka, then the Western countries would have reacted differently."

Abeysekera was forced to leave for the Netherlands after the state-controlled news media labeled her a traitor for her support of a 2012 resolution by the United Nations Human Rights Council calling for "reconciliation and accountability" in Sri Lanka. She had previously taken refuge in the Netherlands in the late 1980s, amid death threats at home.

Sunila Abeysekera was born in Sri Lanka on September 4, 1952, to a politically progressive family. After receiving her education in Colombo, she began her professional life there as an actress, singer and dancer on-stage and in films. She later worked as a drama critic. She became politically active in the mid-1970s as a member of Civil Rights Movement, a multiethnic coalition in Sri Lanka.

The many organizations with which she was associated over the years include the Women and Media Collective in Colombo, which she founded in 1984 to promote feminism throughout South Asia, the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition, which she helped organize, and the Movement for Interracial Justice and Equality in Sri Lanka, of which she was a past president.

She was also known for her advocacy on behalf of sex workers, gay men, lesbians and transgender people, as well as people with HIV and AIDS.

Abeysekera received a master's degree from the program on women and development at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague in 1994.

She returned to the institute last year as the recipient of a Scholars at Risk fellowship, the fellowship provides residency at a consortium of institutions around the world to scholars forced to flee their home countries.

When asked how she bore up under the constant threats her work engendered, Abeysekera replied that she took a certain solace in the fact that they came from all directions.

"When everyone is criticizing you," she said in the interview with *The Unesco Courier*, "then you are doing the right thing."

Sunila Abeysekera is survived by her children Sanjaya and Subha, mother Turin and brothers Prasanna and Ranil.

"The reason many people don't know about her is because it didn't matter to her if she got the credit," Charlotte Bunch, women's human rights advocate and founder of the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University (CWGL), told *RH Reality Check*. Bunch and Abeysekera fostered a deep, 30-year friendship through their shared women's human rights activism, dating back to the United Nations' Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985.

During her more than 40 years of activist work, Abeysekera embodied the intersections of feminism and human rights, of global and local, of tenacious activism and a genuine joy for living.

Abeysekera played an instrumental role during the United Nations' World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, one of the most important moments in modern memory for the human rights of women. She worked closely with the Center for Women's Global Leadership to help organize the global feminist campaign that led to a landmark statement by the United Nations that women's rights are human rights, a phrase that may seem somewhat obvious today, but at the time was revolutionary. This framework helped provide legitimacy to feminist activism, by grounding women's rights within a larger understanding of human rights. From there, she played a pivotal role at other UN World Conferences in the 1990s. She worked to implement the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which dealt with women's participation in peace negotiations, and she engaged in debates to ensure the critical point of



gender inclusion in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Abeysekera helped link the more bureaucratic UN human rights infrastructure with a less institutionalized grassroots, localized feminist activism. She served as a bridge between two worlds that often seemed impossible to unite.

Abeysekera was crucial in organizing the Women's Human Rights Defenders International Coalition in 2005, a global advocacy network dedicated to the recognition and protection of women's and LGBTQ activists as human rights defenders. Members include Amnesty International, the Center for Women's Global Leadership, the Association for Women's Rights in Development, and the Center for Reproductive Rights, among many others. She also served as a board member of the Urgent Action Fund, a global women's fund started in 1997 that helps fund and advocates on behalf of women's human rights activists worldwide.

Eschewing a narrow, single-issue framework in favor of a broad commitment to human rights principles, Abeysekera advocated for reproductive and sexual rights with as much conviction and fervor as she advocated against torture and in favor of other basic human rights. "All human beings are inherently entitled to all human rights" was her personal motto, and she continually advocated for the human rights of the most marginalized, including members of the LGBTQ community, sex workers, and people living with HIV and AIDS.

She embodied the breadth of what a human rights framework could be, and spent much of her life advocating for the inclusion of women and women's specific concerns within that framework. Feminism and human rights were never mutually exclusive for Abeysekera; they blended with and informed each other. It is because of her deep commitment to feminist ideals and her extensive human rights record that women's human rights have achieved a certain level of legitimacy within the United Nations and beyond.

Her commitment to feminism didn't end with her activist work, but extended into her personal life, as well. She was a single mother, and she believed deeply in the feminist tenet of sexual freedom. In the last decades of her life, she became lesbian-identified, "but not in a narrow way."

(excerpted from articles by Lauren Rankin, RH Reality Check Reproductive and Sexual Health and Justice News, Analysis and Com-

Jaswant Gazdar-Exile and Attachment: A Refugee Journal

An Exhibition at Westmount Gallery

WHERE: Westmount Gallery at Victoria Hall

4626 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal

WHEN: November 20– December 12 2013

The Solo exhibit is a series of 76 paintings inspired by artist Jaswant Gazdar's psychiatry and psychotherapy practice with refugee patients.

In her work, Jaswant shares the images of families and individuals floating in the homeless and uncertain realities of stateless individuals who cross borders. Like many artists who have other professional lives her life as a clinician emerges in some of her art productions.

The subject is the Human Body as an embodiment of the inner mental space and not just an expression of the gesture of personhood. The artist comments "The series is offered as a set of visual poems that resonate with the trauma stories that have left me with unresolved feeling...and have been part of my own healing". Her works intend to create an awareness of these families living invisibly amongst us and are part of the "floating" world. It gives us a voice for their unnamed suffering.

SRI LANKA'S UNFINISHED WAR

BBC Our World has evidence that Sri Lankan government security forces have been involved in the torture and rape of Tamil civilians as recently as this year, four years after the Eelam war ended in May 2009.

“A top British lawyer says the BBC's new evidence could amount to on-going crimes against humanity being committed by the Sri Lankan government in a BBC World News documentary to be broadcast 9th November,” according to a BBC statement on Friday.



“As world leaders gather in Colombo for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, the BBC Our World team has gathered first-hand testimony that Sri Lankan government forces are raping and inflicting torture on the minority Tamil population including in the government's official rehabilitation centers. But the government denies such abuses and says the stories are propaganda, designed to further harm the country as it gets back on its feet,” said the BBC.

“In Our World: Sri Lanka's Unfinished War, to be broadcast this weekend, reporter Frances Harrison meets Tamils who say they were picked up and brutally attacked as recently as this year. Victims say they were kidnapped, raped, burned with cigarettes, suffocated, beaten with pipes and burned with metal rods and forced to sign confessions in a language (Sinhala) they couldn't understand,” BBC said, adding that in all, Frances Harrison uncovered evidence of 12 people (eight of them women) who alleged they were raped and tortured in Sri Lanka as recently as this year.

“Most of them have medical reports corroborating their stories or have had their requests for asylum in Europe accepted, based on their allegations of rape and torture.”

Speaking to DC on phone from London, Frances Harrison said for the first time in her Lanka reporting, a woman agreed to speak on camera (all the earlier visuals were either morphed or shot in darkness to protect the identity of the victim who either feared persecution or shame in society).

Nandini (name changed) told her she was picked up from her home earlier this year, driven blindfolded in a van and repeatedly raped by a succession of men in military and civilian clothing.

“I can't sleep because of what happened to me, I often feel suicidal. I don't feel like living,” said Nandini in the interview that forms part of Frances Harrison's 30-minute horror story that will be telecast as ‘Our World: Sri Lanka's Unfinished War’ on BBC World News on Saturday at 5 pm and on Sunday (November 10) at 11 pm.

BBC said a doctor who had investigated over 200 cases of alleged torture from Sri Lanka in the last five years, examined and “counted more than 30 cigarette burns on her body, including her genitals, and concluded the physical and psychological evidence corroborated her story of recent rape and torture.”

While the Sri Lankan military said there were only five reported incidents of sexual violence in the north during 2005-12, the Human Rights Watch has documented 62 cases since the end of the war, BBC said.

(Asian Age, Kolkata 9 Nov 2013)

[Various individuals have uploaded “Sri Lanka's Unfinished War” onto YouTube]

MY BROWN FACE- BY MIRA JACOB

Next time, I'm going to walk into that warehouse and snap my tongue like a honeyed whip. I'm going to unfurl with grace and fury. I will stand in the dead center of the room, and I will say:

Obviously, you were raised in a goddamn barn. Haven't any of you boys ever gotten near a woman, or was your leash too short? Well, I know you've never come close to my kind because you would know better than to hiss "Hey, Indi" at my passing shadow, or try that where-you-from-baby line with that don't-I-know-it look in your eye. And the next time you see me ...

Welcome to my morning fantasy. It starts about forty feet from my door and continues between Brooklyn and Sixth Avenue, occasionally bubbling to the surface in waves of "goddamn." It keeps me occupied on the subway and preoccupied at my desk, my mind shuffling out the endless possibilities of what I'll do next time. By mid-afternoon I've usually pep-rallied myself into a proud-to-be-Indian state of mind, and by nightfall, in an act of denial or resilience, I've let the whole ritual slip away. Survival of the forgetful.

Worse things have happened in this world, to be sure. A steady tap on my remote control informs me of the multitudes of hell that have yet to befall me. My family hasn't been torn apart by war and disease. I'm not under persecution for my political beliefs, and next to "Mama, Stop Screwing My Boyfriend," even my Ricki Lake potential seems small.

"Mira, you say you feel betrayed by your face?" Ricki asks.

"Yes, I do, Ricki, "I reply.

"And can you tell the members of our audience what that means?" she asks, gesturing to the rows of scrutiny, hard gazes and arms folded over chests.

"Well, every morning, the guys on the corner scream `Indi' at me and ask me what style we go for down there, and some mornings I just can't take it."

"Can't take it. Now what does that mean, Mira? What's the worst thing you've done as a result of this?" Ricki gives me a concerned look.

"Uh, nothing, really, it's a more internal kind of thing."

"Okay," Ricki says, not missing a beat. "Our next guest says she is being poisoned by her six-month-old baby. Give a big welcome to ..."

No, my problem is straightforward and undramatically simple: I was born with a mysterious face. My deep brown eyes and skin, the thick line of my black eyebrows and the slant of my cheekbones have always been described to me as exotic, haunting, elusive. From the day I hit puberty, my Indian-ness has labeled me a box full of secrets, left me wrapped as a package of woman labeled "the other." Why are Indian women mysterious? To answer that question I would have to be outside of myself, claiming a territory I don't inhabit --American, male, most often white. As all outsiders do, I can only hazard a guess, regurgitating the perceptions fed to me: Indian women are quiet, graceful, serene and tranquilized by a thousand blue-skinned gods. We are bent heads looking slyly downward, almond eyes and lotus lips tender with secret knowledge. We are fabulous cooks cloaked in layers of bright silk, bangles dangling in permanent dance from our lithe arms. We are a mystery, waiting to be unfolded.

Seattle, late afternoon. The man on the corner is staring at me. I can feel his eyes traveling up my leg, over my stomach and chest, to my face. A smile spreads over his face, and I give all my attention to the red DON'T WALK sign across the street.

"Hey, you're Indian, right?" he asks in greeting, stepping in front of me. I walk around him and wait for the light to turn. "Hey, what's up, you don't speak English? I'm just asking you a question. Where are you from?"

I stare at the stoplight, the row of buildings just beyond it. I stare at the businessmen walking around me and glance down at my watch.

"What time is it? Hey, what time is it, baby?" he asks. A slow pool of people gathers at the corner, and the man talks louder, laughing. "Hey, girl, hey! What time is it where you're from? Nighttime?"

A quick heat rises to my face, and I watch the cars pass. Two men in suits turn their heads slightly, their eyes scanning my face.

"What, you can't speak to me?" he asks, pushing his face next to mine. He smells like mint gum, sweat and city.

The next time I'm going to look right at you. I'm going to stare into your eyes and wait through twenty lights, and when you are finally mute and embarrassed, I'll walk on.

I wait for the light to turn, my stomach churning, the pulse in my ears growing louder.

"You too good to speak to me? That it?"

The WALK sign lights up, and I spring forward, hoping he'll stay behind. He does. "Hey!" he yells after me. "You don't look that good, bitch."

I've been unfolded to the point of splitting. I've had my lid thrust open, my contents investigated by prying eyes, hands, lips. Concealed in compliments, come-ons, gifts, I've been asked to explain the wave of enigma my country of origin arouses in the minds of others.

Indophiles, my Indian friends call the more persistent among them. "Tell me about you," these men ask, the sophisticated version of "Where are you from?" Half listening as I rattle off about anything but my ethnicity, they nod knowingly, more interested in my looks than anything I say. I can see it in them, the hunger for a quiet woman, an erotic encounter, a spicy dish. Some men don't even bother with the formalities, cutting to the chase. "Indian," a man in a bar once said, nodding to me. Then, by way of invitation, his mouth pressed hot against my ear, "*Kamasutra*?"

My mother laughs a tired laugh when I tell her this, her voice weary through the crackling phone line. "Oh, men will do that. You're exciting to them because you're something they do not know, an Indian woman."

An Indian woman. I have been to India several times, and I have watched my aunts and cousins with a mixture of curiosity and awe. I've heard their sing-song chatter and loud-mouthed gossip, watched their deft fingers plucking endless batches of coriander leaves. And while they've never consciously excluded me, my ear cannot follow the lilting mother-tongue conversations, my laugh among them is much too loud. They teasingly call me a tomboy and warn that I may end up marrying my truck, a possibility that repulses them as much as it excites me. Simply put, our graces are instinctually different. My bones and flesh hold the precious truth of a history I can claim more in blood than in experience.

Funny that some men can latch on to a part of me I'm still trying to locate. My brown face has made me the recipient of numerous gifts and cryptic cards, mostly from guys I've met in passing. Broken bird wings, wire necklaces and wine bottles filled with rose petals have all found their way to my doorstep, fervid notes tucked under the windshield of my truck. I once opened up a cardboard box to find shattered mirror pieces glued in careful mosaic inside, my own shocked face staring back at me.

Oh, but those gifts were fun when I was younger, in my teens. Just the thought of some stranger thinking enough of me to plot a course of action had me strutting around like a movie star. I rode the drama bull like a rodeo queen, fancied myself a connoisseur of the slightly deranged and obsessed. Heady stuff--all that desire and frisson, electric connection given in doses. I floated outside my body in a state of awe, imagining something in my very soul conducted the energy around me, leading guys to do things they had "never done before" or "felt before" or "dared to think."

The shift from arousal to fear is as hard to pinpoint as it is unmistakable. As I grew older, these gifts were less appreciated, received on days when I needed to stay in my body and be unaware of it. I couldn't understand the loaded intent behind the presents, and instead I began to realize what was being taken away. That old junkie craving for unseen passion left suddenly, replaced by the certain knowledge that these men were not reacting to me, to my mind or words or wit, but to my face, my brown face.

*

In Denny's, crying to my best friend Laura over coffee, I struggle to keep my eyes averted from the man in the corner, to answer her questions.

"Did you just hear me?" she asks.

"No. Yes. I can't concentrate, that man is watching me. Don't turn around and look." The man stares straight at me with such a force I wonder if I don't know him. I feel his eyes hotter on my face with every word I say, my voice fading as I realize he isn't going to look away. I'm embarrassed that he can see me crying, embarrassed that I can't concentrate. Relieved when I see him get up to pay his bill and walk out, the pinch in my throat loosens, and Laura and I can finally talk.

Our conversation comes to an abrupt halt when the man returns half an hour later with earrings in hand. Two silver Egyptian pharaohs dangle in my blurred line of vision as he announces, "I've been watching you all night. I don't know much about India, but I thought these would look nice on you. *I had* to get them for you." He searches my eyes with brooding intensity, as though we've just established spiritual connection over my Grand Slam breakfast combo. "If I give you my number, will you call?"

If I give you a black eye, will you take it and leave?

"She's upset," Laura says, her head shaking, eyes wide. "She's crying." The man ignores her, pressing a piece of paper into my palm. "My name is Gil. I think you should call me. You know what I mean." He gives me one last penetrating look, spins on his heel and walks out the door.

God bless my heart of darkness, I think I've stumbled upon a Colonizer Syndrome. It takes seemingly normal men and causes them to lose their minds with brash abandon. It's jarring enough to be snapped in and out of one's body, a phenomenon most women grow accustomed to through experience, resilience. Being sexualized has the remarkable effect of erasing even the most introspective of moments, leaving a woman utterly aware of nothing but her body, while at the same time making her a spectator of herself. But while every woman I know has been cat-called enough to land up on that hot tin roof, or yanked off her train of thought by some whistling dimwit, my brown face pushes me into the region of the unknown. I am left in a place uninhabited by white sisters, mothers, wives, where common courtesy takes a back seat to wild inspiration. I am uncharted territory, ripe for the conquest.

Hearing the word *India* from a stranger leaves me feeling naked and raw, as though something sacred in me has been cheapened through exposure. The word becomes insulting rolling off certain tongues, the poison of intent harder to trace back to "Pssst ... Indi" than it is to "nice ass." It's harder to yell back at.

But that's what we're known for, we Indian women: bent heads and shut mouths, quiet grace, the Eastern-girl works. I've seen it so many times before, grown up with it hanging over me like a shadow I would eventually step into and unwillingly claim. Men used to follow my mother through the supermarket, mesmerized at the vegetable court, drooling through the detergents. They drew hearts on her palm at the city dump and made her promise not to wash them off before they let her pass through the gates, curiously blind to the rest of her cargo--me and my brother. They chatted with her at our soccer games, small talk leading to a rush of questions. "Where are you from? You're so unusual looking. You're really quite beautiful ..."

this last part said with a furtive glance in her direction. "India," she would mutter, looking away, a cool weight pressing an invisible screen over her eyes. The same heaviness dulled her eyes sometimes while she cooked or, later, in our nighttime bath ritual. It was a look that hung between boredom and frustration, a thin pulse of anger running through it. But my mother never said anything to these men, who would wait for a thank you, a smile, some sort of acknowledgment. "Why don't you ever smile when people tell you you're pretty?" I asked her once, embarrassed by her rudeness. She never answered me either.

Was she weak? Submissive? Clueless? I can't say that about my mother, She of the Wicked Wit and Ever-Dicing Tongue, an Indian version of a pistol-packing mama, sharpshooting and ready for any showdown. In my house, we know my mother is angry when she yells and, worse, disdainfully apathetic when she is silent, leaving us to boil in our own stew. But the intent behind my mother's deadly quiet, a calm I've seen replayed across the features of many of my other female relatives, isn't often recognized by American men. It's our faces, and our supposed mystery, that they tap into.

My late-teens realization about the powers of mystery, or lack thereof, was followed by the keenest silence my lips have ever observed. Just the mention of my "exotic looks" could shut me up for days on end, a phenomenon previously unwitnessed. Yet contrary to my hasty logic (mute girl = bored guy), my silence only perpetuated the enigma, adding the brute element of interpretation. "I think you're avoiding me," I heard at parties, often only hours after being introduced to a guy. "You're scared of our connection, right? I know you can feel it. I felt it the minute I laid eyes on you." And here it was again, the bond, the miracle, the connection associated with my face, the need to be led into whatever temple I had available. I saw desire thrown back to me in fragments of Taj Mahal, *Kamasutra*, womanly wiles. I felt my body turn into a dark country, my silence permission to colonize.

Next time, I will undress in the middle of the room. I will show you the scar of nightmares on my inner thigh and tuck my vision behind your eyelids. This is what you will remember when you wake sweating at night: the sickened Braille of my skin, the emptiness behind my eyes, the blindness of your desire.

Battle tactics--swing hard and low, use the force of motion. My brother taught me that around the time he bought me a thread bracelet for "protection against freaks." I have a mediocre right hook and a prize-fighting tongue, and at age twenty I storm the fort, beginning an all-out war against anything mysterious in me. I begin to talk. Really talk. From the moment I encounter a man, my mouth becomes a vicious running motor, spewing forth indelectable information at a rapid pace. Pauses, silences and ever-sneaky meaningful-eye-contact moments become the perfect stage for an update on my bowel movements and skin abrasions. I curse loudly and often enough to leave me free of a docile stereotype. Too much information becomes my best defense against mystery, rattling off my own lid and investigating my contents in front of anyone who dares to watch. Laden with the ammunition of bodily functions and lewd neuroses, I wreck any sacred shrine I could possibly hold inside me, leaving both me and my audience standing in awkward rubble. With each demolition I am chatterboxing, punching behind my words, swinging fast and hard into conversation with my vicious tongue. With each demolition I am breathless, tired, terrified of being caught off guard.

"I can't stop talking," I confess to Laura over the phone. "I never know where the conversation is going to go." I was exhausted, bone bitten, weary of any man I met, on edge with those I already knew. Every part of my body had been itemized into comedic value, and a mere glance would set me smacking any tender portion into a window display, a caricature.

"I know," Laura said quietly. "I'm worried about you. I don't recognize you sometimes." I was hardening inside, a thick callus growing over my ribs. Any hint that I might soften for a minute, crave something kind, threw me into a panic. I knew she was right. I had become no more than a jumble of body parts, a facade raised in perfect opposition to the white man's Indian woman. "I don't recognize me either," I told her.

And that may be the one sticky truth I have to hold on to: I am not so easy to recognize. I am not so easy to taste, to sample or to know. But this truth, far from being an elusive beckoning to an outsider, or one last boundary for the brave to cross, is a mystery that is only mine. It's the puzzle of how to let myself evolve in a world that will never stop assuming my identity.

In trying to be anything but a brown face, an exotic myth, I almost lost the best part of who I am. I dissected myself into a jumble of Indian and American parts, deeming all things Indian as seductive and weak, and trying to find salvation in being an un-touchable "lewd American." And yet, after all of my talking and muting, and general abusing of my body, nothing outside of me had changed. Even if I had opened my mouth and poured every last bit of myself into shifting perceptions and the rest of the cosmos, I was, am and will always be seen as "an Indian woman." So the terror for me is also the one realization that offers me hope: I can't change the reactions that my face triggers. It's not my battle to fight.

I also know that *my* Indian woman isn't the shared secret some men imply, with their hissing "Indis," their darting eyes and spice-hungry lips. She isn't the love of curry or the cool crush of silk beneath greedy palms or "chai tea" served redundantly and by the gallon at Starbucks.

My Indian woman is a work in progress. I find her in the grumbling of my daily subway commute, in the damp green smell of coriander leaves and in late-night drives in my track. She resides in the thousand small deaths my parents lived through to part from their mother country, in the survival skills they have taught me and in the legendary powers of silence. My Indian woman is not the history of submission, but the history of resilience, of beginning again. It's this woman who is at the center of me, the one the men on the street will never see: this woman who is simultaneously on fire and rising from the ashes.

Essay taken from book—*Body Outlaws: Rewriting the Rules of Beauty and Body Image* edited by Ophira Edut

Centre Communautaire des femmes sud-asiatiques

South Asian Women's Community Centre
 1035, rue Rachel est, 3ième étage.
 Montréal, QC H2J 2J5

Phone: 514-528-8812
 Fax: 514-528-0896
 E-mail: sawcc@bellnet.ca

31 years of sisterhood, strength, struggle and success 1981-2013

www.sawcc-ccfsa.ca

Dec 5—Information session on Adult Education

Dec 7— Remembering December massacre at Polytechnique

Dec 10—Information session on nutrition and healthy habit of eating

Dec 13—SAY meeting 530PM

Dec 15—Year End Party

Dec 17— Information session TBD

Dec 23 to Jan 3— SAWCC CLOSED

Le 5 déc—Session d'information sur la formation pour les adultes

Le 7 déc- Session de commémorer les victimes de Polytechnique

Le 10 déc— Session d'information sur la nutrition

Le 13 déc—Réunion du collectif des Jeunes sud-asiatiques (JSA) 5h30

Le 15 déc— Fête annuelle de la fin d'année au CEDA

Le 17 déc—Session d'information sujet indéterminé

DECEMBER 2013

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
						
8	9	10		11	12	13
						14
15		16	17		18	19
					20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				