reek of saltwater: the breath of the
Indian Ocean lingers on my tanned
skin and sweat trickles down my
back, my legs, my nose. A bony elbow
juts into my ribs and a stranger’s hand
rests familiarly on my shoulder while
another calloused hand overlaps my
own on a sticky, metallic surface: an
ordinary train pole suddenly trans-
formed into a quasi-artistic exhibit of
palms and digits, a tenuous resting
place for desperate hands and reaching
fingers, many settling atop one another.
To think that a sudden jolt would cause
me to lose my balance is absurd; I can-
not move. I clutch the pole, an anchor
in a sea of bodies, saltwater, sweat.

Miraculously, inexplicably, each
stop brings more evening commuters.
They can’t possibly get on. But they do.
Every inhalation is laborious, the breath
knocked out of my lungs as people vie
for precious space, pushing against my
chest, stomping on my feet. I close my
eyes, but this only amplifies the impres-
sion of making physical contact with a
dozen pulsating bodies at once.

Deep breaths. I count each inhala-
tion: One. Two. Three.

We are animals in a crate, I think to
myself. No pretense. No sophistication.
Nothing pretty about it. We are nothing
but skin and hands and sweat. The times
I have felt most aware of my body, of my
physical presence, have been instances
such as this, tinged with an air of despera-
tion and an obsession with the space I
occupy.

Indirectly, I learned the word “vitiligo”
on the train. Patchy faces and hands;
unexpected, almost shocking spots of
white skin. Having never seen depig-
tmentation characteristic of vitiligo
before, I went home and googled my
observations. Vitiligo. It was a new
word added to my medical vocabu-
lar — an easily attained, simple
answer. The definition brought me relief.

Not all answers have been so easy.

There was a young man speechmaking
in uninterrupted Sinhalese and, at first, I
believed him to be a vendor executing a
carefully rehearsed script. Hopefully cran-
ing my neck over other passengers’ heads
to peek at his wares, I saw that he was not
carrying chilled pineapple slices after all:
in the place of imagined snacks was a
flimsy paper, opaque in some areas and
completely translucent in others. Per-
plexed, I stole another glance and was star-
tled: it was an x-ray. He approached my
part of the train, jingling a paper cup, pre-
senting his medical image, willing passen-
gers to bear witness to proof of his injury.

It was the first time I noticed his limp.
What happened to you?

Another trip, another journey, and I
felt repulsed by an unexpected, weak grip
around my ankle. I looked down to see a
one-legged older man, missing a few fin-
gers, dragging himself across the dirty
train floor with his functional digits. He
slowly waded through feet, his torso

∞

It is the summer of 2014. I am on the
Colombo Commuter en route from
Colombo, the largest city in Sri Lanka,
to Ragama, where a classmate and I are
conducting a research project focused
on mental health at the Rheumatology
and Rehabilitation Hospital. In the
month I’ve been here, I’ve learned that
the train is where I can feel foreign, but
also as if I belong; it is where the curi-
ous nudge and stare and where the bold
interrogate (Where were you born?),
but it is also where, at times like this,
we are all homogenous — fleshy, tired,
en route.

∞

Encounters

What happened to you?

Julia Naves

reaching other passengers’ knees. He was invisible until you heard his low-pitched pleading, felt his unexpected touch on your ankle, heard the familiar jingling cup. My shock gave way to extreme shame at my initial reaction: the cringe at his aged hand clasping my ankle, my withdrawal. **What happened to you?**

Then there were the scarred faces, unexplained lacerations, stiff movements. Excoriations, scratches, rashes. The lists go on. **What happened to you?**

∞

During these crammed journeys, I wonder about my fellow passengers; I wonder what ails them, but more than that I wonder about their own journeys. **What happened to you? Where are you going? What do you do?** I don’t understand the language, the subtle gestures, the written signs. I am living in a mystery, surrounded by a thousand individual journeys converging into one, lives thrown unceremoniously into a crowded compartment, paths unknown joining in a strange, physical intimacy. An x-ray of a man’s injury, an ancient hand clasping for ankles, a stranger’s calloused palm on a shoulder, a dozen sweaty bodies against my skin. In unfamiliar territory, I’m closer to some humans than I have ever been, yet without knowledge of their lives. **What happened to you? How do I understand? What can I do?**

I wonder, I anguish, I question — at the end of the day, I try and accept.

Accept that, for a while, we have this journey in common — difficult, necessary, shared.

Accept that, for a moment, there we are: bodies sticky with sweat, animal, human, healthy, unhealthy, converging, diverging, hurtling through dark countryside, wading through viscous time.

Temporarily, there we are.

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