

*How do I explain the word?*

*Ka ktien.*

*Say it. Out loud. Ka ktien. The first, a short, sharp thrust of air from the back of your throat. The second, a lift of the tongue and a delicate tangle of tip and teeth.*

*For I mean, not what's bound by paper. Once printed, the word is feeble and carries little power. It wrestles with ink and typography and margins, struggling to be what it always was. Spoken. Unwritten, unrecorded. Old, they say, as the first fire. Free to roam the mountains, circle the hearth, and fall as rain.*

*We, who had no letters with which to etch our history, have married our words to music, to mantras, that we repeat until lines grow old and wither and fade away. Until they are forgotten and there is silence.*

*How do I explain something untraceable? The perfect weapon for a crime. Light as pine dust.*

*Echoing with alibis. Conjuring out of thin air, the ugly, the beautiful, the terrifying.*

*Eventually, like all things, it is unfathomable. So, how do I explain?*

*Perhaps it's best, as they did in the old days, to tell a story.*

I learnt about the word long ago, when I was young and had seen no more than thirteen winters. In those days, the nights were so cold that frost gathered on our roofs and gardens like snow. Well, that's what the bilati men said it looked like, for we had never seen snow in all our lives. They would huddle by the fire at the gate to Sahib Jones's bungalow and talk about their homes far away across the sea. I would bring wood and coal to bolster the flames, and eavesdrop; they paid no attention to this dark, snotty-nosed boy in his threadbare clothes and frayed woollen shawl. They'd speak of places I'd never heard of, names that slipped through my memory like little silver doh thli I tried to catch in the streams. I dreamt about it sometimes, the land of gently rolling hills, thatch cottages, and women white as the 'tiew khlaw that grew wild by the roadside. The bilati men had come to guard the land and tea plantation of an owner we hardly saw; their presence there forever changed the lives of the people of Pomreng village.

It was the 1850s, and Pomreng was a smudge that probably couldn't be found on any map of the area at the time. It lay nestled on a bit of grassy flatland, a cluster of fifty huts, ribboned by a river that flowed languid and deep before plunging down a steep rocky cliff. Shillong, then called Laban, lay at the end of a rough, day-long, horse-cart journey on a dirt track twisting through forested hills or miles of desolate countryside. Our people rarely ventured out except for the occasional family visit or trip to the big market. Nothing ever happened at Pomreng; it was a quiet life, marked by sowing and harvests, steady as the seasons. Which was why there was great excitement at the news that a judge from Sylhet had bought vast swathes of land outside our village, to grow tea and build himself a pleasure palace full of wondrous things. 'The ceiling will be high as the trees,' it was reported. 'They're bringing maw-Sohra all the way here for the floors.' It would have a hundred rooms and a hundred servants. Eventually, the palace turned out to be a humble lime-washed, stone bungalow atop a hillock, with a smaller cottage and sheds and stables further down the slope. But we weren't disappointed; it was still the largest construction we'd ever seen. The judge arrived with his family on a short vacation at the end of the monsoon, and departed soon after, but they left behind a unit of soldiers and their horses. The estate was managed by a missionary named Thomas Jones, and rumour had it that he was

on the run from a rascal bilati businessman in Sohra who wanted him hanged for encouraging the locals to question the price of his goods. We didn't know if that was true, but Sahib Jones did look perpetually worried, his sombre face pale as a stub of bitter white radish. He strode around dutifully inspecting the tea bushes and large garden, checking every once in a while on the men and their animals, yet there hung about him an air of nervous disquiet.

My young mother worked as a maid for his wife Memsahib Greta, which was how I ended up employed as help around the house and estate, doing various odd jobs and running errands. I didn't mind; we needed every bit of spare cash since my father walked out on his wife and five children one night in a drunken fury and never returned. I also worked extra hard because my secret ambition was to some day get out of Pomreng and make my way to Shillong. If I could, I would take my mother and siblings with me. The little money I saved I hid in an old sock under my mattress. Every morning, I'd crawl out of bed as dawn broke outside our shuttered windows, bathing the hills in milky white light, and head to Sahib Jones's kitchen, a stone building separate from the main house, where my mother would be preparing sweet red tea in a large blackened kettle. From there I'd carry the cups on a tray out to the men—first the ones who'd been up all night at the gate, and then to the others. After a while, I came to know them well—Pat, a big man the size of a bear; Roger, the one with blazing orange hair; Trotter, a stout red-faced soldier with the loudest voice in camp; and most of all Sahib Sam, the only one who thanked me when I handed him his cup of tea. I marvelled at the strangeness of their skin, their eyes like bits of coloured glass, the unfamiliar intonations of their language. Even their smell, I thought, was different. I wondered why they'd given up their homes and families to protect a cold, muddy slice of land in a place they couldn't possibly care about. But as Mama Saiñ, the village headman, said, it was the bilati men with their guns and cannons who ruled us, and hence this was their territory too. Besides, he added, they were also probably people on the run, like Sahib Jones, who found shelter and safety in Pomreng's isolation. I wouldn't have been surprised to discover that Trotter, Pat and some of the others were criminals—they were rough, filthy-mouthed men who grew more garrulous and aggressive by the day. Sometimes I saw them whip the plantation workers or knock them down with their horses.

'Move, you bastards,' they'd shout. 'Get to work before we peel the flesh off your bones.'

I was petrified of them and kept out of their way as much as possible. Since I was small and insignificant, it wasn't too difficult to slip past them without being noticed. I did quite well until one morning when I tripped while carrying a tray, and spilled hot tea on Trotter's lap.

'Bastard,' he yelled, jumping up from the moora, and cuffing my ear so hard I fell to the ground bleeding. He was about to strike again when suddenly a pair of legs in muddy black boots appeared in front of me.

'Leave the boy alone, Trotter, it was an accident.' It was Sahib Sam.

'Burnt my balls, the little son of a bitch.'

'That's good to know, Trotter. Some of us were worried you didn't have any.'

The laughter that followed drowned out Trotter's belligerent shouts.

'Are you alright there, boy?' A pair of bright blue eyes looked into mine. Sahib Sam had bent over me, his hand on my shoulder. I nodded, too scared to speak, and as soon as I was on my feet, I ran like I was being chased by a wild animal.

From that time on, I saved the largest cup of tea for Sahib Sam, and the choicest piece of meat for his dinner, the sweetest 'pu khleif' cakes bought from our local market, and the largest, driest logs of wood for whenever he was on night duty. As captain of the unit he had probably warned Trotter as well, for apart from a string of verbal abuses if I happened to pass by, the red-faced pig left me alone.

For almost a year, we existed companionably enough, mostly because the bilati men were indifferent towards us, and all we felt on our part was awe and more than a little fear. They stayed within the confines of the plantation, training, taking care of their animals, settling in, and we kept to our village and the countryside beyond, preparing for weekly market days, attending archery competitions and quietly ploughing our fields, eking out a living from Pomreng's hard, red soil. I think trouble started when the soldiers ventured into the village. Around the camp I heard them talk of the tedium of their work, the place, their lives. Of having nothing much to do, and nowhere to go. Sahib Jones, though a fair and just master, frowned upon epicurean revelry, so the men weren't given many days leave to travel to Shillong. Although they didn't lead what could be called a tough life. Far from it. Apart from a few instances where cattle were carried off by tigers, there was no great danger from other perpetrators. The men were filled with boredom and restlessness. They started attending market days, and bullied the sellers over their prices, sometimes walking off without bothering to pay. Sahib Sam and his friends didn't do this, I noticed, but among the villagers who didn't know one soldier from another, grumbled murmurs started about them in general. 'When are they going to leave?', 'Who do they think they are, stealing from us.'

The place where the men liked to meet and play cards was Bah Lumen's jadoh stall located at the end of the only main road that ran through the village. Apart from tea, the stall also served local kiad, a clear, strong alcohol made from rice, that the bilati men enjoyed immensely. At first the owner was pleased—'They all drink like fish...it's good business'—until fights started breaking out, food and drinks were ordered on credit, and women of (what my mother called) unsavoury character started appearing on the premises. They seemed alright to me, cheerful and friendly, and generous with their laughter. Sometimes when I helped out at the jadoh stall for a little extra money, I'd see the men call a girl over, negotiate a price, and then disappear to the barracks.

'The brothels are in Laban, not in my food shop,' complained Bah Lumen, and Mama Saiñ would tell him that the town was too far for hot young blood to travel and he might as well start charging a commission from the whores. There were rumours that some soldiers, Trotter and his gang I suspect, would pick up village women returning from the fields or from fetching water from the river, and carry them off on their horses. Sahib Sam, I was relieved to see, paid attention only to one young lady—Bah Lumen's eldest daughter, Haphida, a pretty girl with clear skin, bright eyes and hair so long it touched the back of her knees. She would shyly bring over his food and tea, and he'd try and converse in the few Khasi words he'd learnt, but, as I came to understand later, you didn't need language to decipher a lingering glance or touch of the hand. If Bah Lumen disapproved, there was nothing he could do, and he only voiced his objections to Mama Saiñ or to no one in particular as he chopped onions or stirred a pot of lumpy yellow rice. 'These outsiders, what do they think? He'll get my daughter pregnant, and we'll have a half and

half on our hands. I've heard it happens. All over the place, little bastards running around with blue eyes and white skin.'

While he and the village seethed in slow resentment, Sahib Sam and Haphida, oblivious to the world outside their own, met every day, in the lull between afternoon tea and the evening revelry. Often, I saw them go for walks, and though I followed close behind, I hardly heard them converse. They'd stroll leisurely by the river, while twilight hovered over the valley, darkening the hills around us, and make their way to the waterfall. There, they'd sit on one of the large boulders, Haphida's hair flowing onto the ground. He'd gather it up carefully and place it on her lap, or pluck wild 'tiew khlaw for her to braid into her locks. Once, they kissed, tentatively at first, and then suddenly with great urgency, as though time and the world were passing them by. Other kids from the village, who'd been bathing nearby, whistled from the undergrowth, sending a shower of stones from their catapults.

'Ei, Sahib bilat, kbih noh,' they shouted, while Haphida flushed a deep crimson. She refused to tell Sahib Sam what they'd said but I presume he guessed for he shouted back, saying he'd have them whipped.

The breaking point, though, between the village people and the soldiers, had nothing to do with the two lovers. One market day, when Trotter walked off with a bunch of corn cobs he didn't pay for, the local farmer spat at the soldier's boots.

'What did you just do?' shouted the red-faced pig.

'You're a thief,' said the farmer in Khasi, 'a thief with no balls.'

Or something like that. The versions vary. Yet I suppose it didn't matter what he said, Trotter would have had his revenge simply for being talked back to. The man was tied to Trotter's horse, and dragged behind him for a day. When he was finally released, his body was caked in blood and dust, his skin shredded to mulch. He didn't last the night.

The village council met in Mama Saiñ's hut, and gathered around the hearth. Close to the glowing embers stood a wooden thlong, perpetually filled with water. Our people believed it could predict the future—the higher the water level, the better the harvest. Right now, though, no one cast a glance at the vessel. There were other, more tragic things to discuss. I was there to stoke the fire and serve tea spiked with kiad to bolster their ravaged spirits. A muted rebellion ran through the crowd in the room. One young man couldn't contain his anger any longer.

'Something must be done,' he spluttered.

Mama Saiñ, flames dancing in his eyes, sipped his drink in silence. A murmur rose around him, voices filled with anger and grief. It was cruel what the bilati men had done (what some of the bilati men had done I wanted to add, but didn't dare), they needed to be punished, to be driven out of the land, the village would fight them and take its revenge for all the wrongs the outsiders had committed.

Finally Mama Saiñ spoke. 'What will we fight them with?'

A silence fell broken only by the hiss and crackle of the fire. The bilati soldiers had guns, while we wielded only primitive swords and shot inadequate wooden arrows.

'There are enough of us against them,' someone shouted. 'Damn their guns, we can overpower them by sheer strength and numbers.'

A chorus of agreement swelled in the room.

Mama Saiñ shook his head. 'We would lose too many men. Would you have your own brothers slaughtered in vain like chickens?'

The debate continued for almost an hour, until an old man, whom everyone called Nong Kñia, spoke up. He'd been sitting in the corner, quietly observing the proceedings. 'Rangbah,' he said softly, 'we can fight them with words.'

Gasps of disbelief and laughter escaped the crowd. The old man remained stoic and silent, his silver beard catching the firelight. His face, though lined and aged, held the resolute stamp of pride. Mama Saiñ nodded, and looked around at his people. 'We have one weapon, poor as it may seem, the power of ktien—the word. It is our last resort because it is dishonourable to fight an enemy without giving him a chance to defend himself.'

'That could be corrected,' said the old man. 'We won't strike the men.'

'Then what?' said a man sitting closest to the fire. I recognized him as the younger brother of the farmer who'd died. 'They killed Jymmang. We need to kill them.'

The old man shook his head. 'There are other ways to render them powerless.'

Late that night, after my younger siblings were put to sleep, my mother and I warmed our hands by a small coal chula. I asked her who the Nong Kñia was and what he meant by ktien. My mother, her face sunken in tiredness, looked at me and smiled. 'He is the bearer of the Word. The one who performs our rituals and communicates with the gods. The memsahib says she would like to teach me to read and write, with something called "alphabet" that her husband has invented for our language. I explained to her that we have no need for these things—books, and letters, and writing—and that everything we know about the world is in the sound of our words, ki ktien. It has the power to do good...'

'Like what?' I asked quickly; I rarely heard my mother talk of these things. She was always too busy or, at the end of the day, often exhausted. 'Like your grandfather,' she replied. 'He could heal a person by uttering a mantra. Once, I remember I cut my hand while splitting bamboo...and he held it, and spoke into it, and the bleeding stopped. People would come to him if they had fish bones stuck in their throat—he'd chant the words and rub their neck with oil and ash, and the bone would be gone. He told me there are mantras that hungry travellers can chant for an animal to appear before them so they can feed, and to bring clean water from a river, or fruit from a tree.'

The embers in the chula were dying; I knew we wouldn't be sitting around it for long.

'But can it also be used to bring harm?'

My mother nodded.

'Is that what Nong Kñia and Mama Saiñ will use on the bilati men? All of them?'

She pushed herself away from the chula. 'Who can say what mantras the Nong Kñia knows...'

For days after, I moved around distracted and restless. The hours passed by glistening with sunshine and sudden autumn showers, yet they'd shifted, a little askew and out of line. I was nervous, constantly waiting for something to happen. The other villagers seemed to feel the same as they left to work in the fields or opened their makeshift shops for business. They talked about it endlessly in hushed whispers over smoking pipes and cups of tea, but no one knew exactly what the elders had planned. I tried to keep the soldiers, especially Sahib Sam, within my sight as much as possible—following them around, an unobtrusive shadow. One afternoon,

the bilati men were exercising and training their horses in the field at the bottom of the hill; soon they would take them back to the stables and it would be time for lunch. I was helping my mother with the washing, hanging it out to dry. I glanced at them repeatedly; when would they all drop dead? Or would they fall ill and languish slowly? Whatever it was going to be, I had to do something, I decided. I had to warn Sahib Sam. When I finished wringing the bedsheets, I hovered as inconspicuously as I could by the gate leading to the field, trying to spot him. After a while, I realized he wasn't there. Had something already happened? I could feel my heart thump heavily against my chest. Perhaps I was too late. Then I remembered that at this time, he usually met with Sahib Jones and retired to the barracks until lunch. I raced up the hill, scattering a hen and her family of chicks, and headed to the long rectangular stone building that housed the soldiers. To my relief, I could see Sahib Sam sitting on the veranda, smoking, reading a book. I crept up to him and waited to be acknowledged.

'Hello, boy.' His eyes were the colour of our April skies.

Suddenly everything I wanted to say sounded silly to my ears. What would I tell him? That a couple of old men were plotting to murder the entire regiment? And how? Through a mantra? But he was looking at me expectantly, and I had to say something to explain my reason for being there.

'Is everything alright?'

'The people in the village...they are angry about Bah Jymmang,' I said, hoping his Khasi was good enough for him to understand me. He frowned, but I could see comprehension dawn on his face.

'Yes, I heard about what happened. It was terrible...'

'They plan to harm you,' I interrupted. 'Be careful.' And then I fled, leaving him staring after me, the book open on his lap.

Yet I suppose no amount of warning could have prepared Sahib Sam and the other soldiers for what happened. Or saved them. It took everyone by surprise, including the people from the village. As the Nong Kñia had promised, his mantra didn't harm the bilati men; it was much worse. It happened a fortnight after our village meeting, when everyone had almost given up on the elders taking their revenge, when dark murmurs spread of the younger men wanting to sneak into the barracks to slit the soldiers' throats while they were sleeping. That afternoon, they say it started with Trotter's horse who refused to be led into the stable; he whipped and yelled at the creature until it obeyed. Inside, while the animals were being rubbed down, they appeared unusually restless, swishing their tails, flaring their nostrils, and pricking their ears, as though listening to a sound no one else could hear. Then they began shifting fretfully in their stalls, stamping on the hay, kicking against the walls. I could hear the bilati men shout out orders to the animals—'Stay, boy, stay'—and to each other. Soon, the horses grew impossible to control or contain—they reared and neighed, baring their teeth, knocking over their masters, trampling on bodies fallen to the floor. A fierce madness overtook them, their eyes turned white and wild, and, full of a great and invisible terror, they dashed blindly out of the door with men trailing behind them. I saw them charge down the hill, a herd of savage horses, their bodies steaming, their manes flying out behind them. People tried to move aside but some were slow and got crushed beneath their hooves. They barely had time to scream. Once the horses were outside the village, they galloped down the road by the river, the one which Sahib Sam and

Haphida had walked down so many evenings. They made straight for the waterfall, and leaped, soaring over the emptiness and falling into the mist. The pool at the bottom was the colour of blood for almost a week.

‘It was like they were possessed by the devil himself,’ the soldiers told Sahib Jones later, while he was tending to their wounds. I followed behind him, carrying a tray of clean rags and medication. ‘They were out of control.’ Most of them said they’d never seen anything like this before, even though they’d worked with horses for most of their lives. ‘It doesn’t bode well,’ I thought I heard the missionary man mutter.

That night the fires in the camp burned brighter and longer as though to keep away the forces of darkness. The air was pungent with fear. No one slept. The soldiers huddled together, if not for warmth, then comfort, drinking, speaking of England, of their homes across the sea. The Nong Kñia had been right; there were other ways to render them powerless.

After that began the gradual disintegration of the camp. Some men fled the barracks, convinced the place was cursed, and that they’d be next to go insane and fling themselves over the waterfall. A few others drank themselves to death on local kiad. Sahib Jones buried them in the corner of the field where once they’d exercised their horses, their graves marked by wooden crosses painted with their names. A few months later, news spread that the goons hired by the rascal businessman in Sohra had traced Sahib Jones’s whereabouts and were on their way to Pomreng to find him. The missionary left in haste one morning before dawn for Guwahati and some say he made it to freedom, while others believed he died of malaria on a steamer on his way to Calcutta. When his wife followed a fortnight later, my mother was dismissed from service and so were the remaining men. There was no one left for them to guard and protect. Sahib Sam was the last to leave even though there was nothing, and no one, for whom he needed to stay back. On the day of the horses’ madness, amid the carnage along the road, we’d found Haphida. She must have been bringing back water from the river. Her face was trampled beyond recognition, but we knew her from her hair, tangled in the dust.

Before his departure, Sahib Sam took a walk to the waterfall, and I followed him, fearing the worst. He stood there a long while, and I waited anxiously, hidden in the shrubbery. Did I have a right to encroach upon his grief? When he took a step closer to the edge, I stepped out of my hiding place onto the road. I tried to make it seem casual, as though I too had decided to take a stroll and happened to be in the same place. I was sure he’d heard me, for I shuffled my feet on the gravel, but he didn’t turn. I stood by him, at a safe, respectful distance. The view before me is etched in my mind so clearly I can close my eyes and remember it all—the waterfall sweeping over a rocky cliff patched with damp moss and long, feathery ferns, falling like liquid mist into a pool and winding unseen into a forest. Beyond this, trees covering the expanse of valley and hills, until they appeared in the distance not as single entities but a smooth carpet of green.

‘What happened that day?’ asked Sahib Sam.

I didn’t know whether he was referring to the horses or Haphida, so I remained silent.

His eyes were shiny; his hair and moustache, I noticed, looked untidy and unkempt.

‘They went over. Just like that...why?’ He laughed. ‘Perhaps it was a relief.’

I tried to disprove politely, to speak of the sheer drop, the seemingly endless fall...

‘There must have been something...’ he interrupted, shaking his head. ‘Do you have a name for it, boy? In your language.’

‘For what, sir?’ Did he know about ktien, and the mantras?

‘This.’ He gestured in front of him. ‘It’s difficult to explain... they say it’s the call of the void, you know...the pull you feel when you stand looking down from a great height. The urge to jump...’

‘No—I don’t think so. Do you?’

He shook his head. ‘It’s strange, all the things that language cannot say.’ He stood there a while longer and then turned and walked away.

Nobody lives in Pomreng any more. One by one, people packed up and left the village. They say dark magic always leaves a trace, and our harvests failed year after year, despite the usual turn of seasons. The water hardly rose halfway up in the thlong. Bah Lumen, grieving for Haphida, was one of the first to leave, along with others who’d lost family that day. He said he could never forgive the village elders for what they’d done, that nothing was worth losing his daughter. My mother and I eventually pooled our money and resources together and left for Shillong, where she found a job in a memsahib’s household and I worked in a jadoh stall in the Laban market. Mama Saiñ, I heard, passed away in a relative’s house in Sohra. I don’t know what became of the Nong Kñia; as the world changes and its mysteries diminish, there are fewer people like him to be found. Pomreng is an abandoned village now with barely any recognizable markers of its past. Only a few stones stand atop a barren hill, a cluster of tea bushes grow wild; while the wooden barracks and stables have crumbled into dust. The wind and the wilderness have had their way with the roads and fields, making them indistinguishable from each other. The one thing that remains is the waterfall, throwing up a sound, a word that is ungraspable and constant.