

War

by Ajay Nair

She burps, a burp full of longing and satisfaction, then regards me with an un-shy grin and says, 'Excuse my French'. She is wearing shades that blend in with the smooth, dark skin of her face and if I didn't know better, I'd think that the shades are her eyes, they are so smooth and black and large and all-seeing.

She leans across the table and tells me a story from her childhood. When she was twelve, she stubbed her little toe hard against the iron leg of a table while pacing around in the dark. She stumbled into the living room where her mother and sister were watching television. She collapsed into a lonely chair and told them about the injury and how it was hurting badly and she moaned softly. Her mother continued to watch her show and then turned to her sister and said, 'Looks like she's really been hurt.' Her sister, ten years old then and stuffed indiscriminately with baby fat, replied, 'Yes, it does appear so.' They went back to the show which was about a melodramatic family with the mother dying of ovarian cancer. The son had just told the father that he was gay and they had hugged. She whispers to me, 'It was as if I was not in the room. It was as if they were conscious of my pain but not of me.'

I look at her in cool contemplation. I tell her that wars are known to have been fought, floods are known to have swept entire cities under water. Once, an elephant contracted a sudden bolt of insanity in the streets of Ernakulam and trampled three children under her feet before she was shot to death. It took them seven bullets to bring her down.

Her full-lipped mouth regards me with a bitter, mirthless smile. She slips one shoe off, slides her chair back, rocks it on to its two hind legs with precise precariousness and lifts her left foot on to the

table. Her little toe is grotesque to behold — crooked, misshapen, a mangled lump of brown flesh and white bone.

'This, my love, is what war looks like'.

