In the last chapter of Michael Ondaatje Anil's Ghost, three Sri Lankans blow up a 120-foot statue of Buddha that had gazed over neighboring farmland for "several generations" (299). Although Anil's Ghost was published a year before the Taliban blew up a much more ancient and even taller statue of Buddha in the Afghan province of Bamiyan, the scene is all the more vivid for readers who recall those disturbing news photos of March 2001. A Buddha reduced to rubble in minutes, an image of spiritual peace and transcendence literally smashed to bits, offers a powerful instance of the fragility of art and the erasure of history. When we add that Ondaatje's Buddha collapses in an isolated area where local terrorists have tortured and buried their victims, we may feel that we have entered the landscape of contemporary terrorism itself. Set in this landscape, Anil's Ghost is surely a novel of terrorism, but one that abandons most of the conventions of the genre. It reproduces no political rhetoric, adjudicates no political claims, projects no political solutions. Its terrorists remain shadowy, nameless figures, encountered briefly; no police, no secret agents, no journalist heroes emerge to lock wits with them, hunt them down, or play the part of secret sharer. We understand early that we will find no master narratives, no organic psychologies, no resolution and no moral.

By omitting so much of what we expect from a political novel in the way of public events and historical detail, Ondaatje might risk aestheticizing terror, repeating the modernist gesture of turning away from atrocity to timeless form. But rather, I would argue, his distinctive achievement in Anil's Ghost is to create a narrative structure that replicates the experience of terror. Written in even more tightly condensed fragments than his earlier books, the novel asks the reader to engage in an act of reconstruction, piecing together stories and psychologies as the Sri Lankan artist, Ananda, will piece together the ruined Buddha. Like Ananda's reconstruction, the reader's will be imperfect, a human artifact with visible sutures. But though this narrative structure lends itself to a spatial metaphor, the "little bits of mosaic" to which Ondaatje compared The English Patient and his earlier novels ("Interview," Wachtel), its temporal dimension is perhaps even more critical. The novel is characterized by those abrupt breaks in time that Ursula Heise calls "chronoschisms," ruptures that postmodern novelists, unlike their modernist predecessors, refuse to assimilate to the "unifying time of the individual mind"(7). The chronoschisms in Anil's Ghost create a sense of time experienced through terror, by people living in fear that they can be blown away in an instant, to whom historical perspective is an alien luxury. What human beings of good will and intelligence, to use Forster's phrase, might accomplish in such a time, becomes the novel's central question.

Before we can talk about the novel, we need to look briefly, in the most literal way, at the time of terror in which Anil's Ghost is set. In interviews, Ondaatje has stressed his interest in the "unhistorical, unofficial" story, "what goes on in private," how ordinary people live through violence: "the book isn't just about Sri Lanka; it could be Guatemala or Bosnia or
Ireland" (Wasafiri 7). One obvious difference, however, between Sri Lanka and these other trouble spots, at least for North American readers, is its unfamiliarity. This readership's ignorance poses a problem that an omniscient narrator with an authoritative overview would solve. But Ondaatje, who shares the postmodern resistance to any version of "the true and one story" that suggests that "we know how to fix" an elusive reality, asserts that in writing this novel he did "backflips" to avoid having it "taken as representative" (Wasafiri 6,7). His head note, therefore, limits itself to informing us that the crisis depicted took place between the mid-1980s and early 1990s and "involved three essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerillas in the north. Both ... had declared war on the government. ... Legal and illegal government squads were ... sent out to hunt down the separatists and the insurgents" (v). Though this note omits ethnic, religious, and political labels, the text identifies by name actual archaeological sites with their Buddhist and Hindu artifacts, distinguishes between Tamil-speaking terrorists and Sinhala-speaking government officials, and depicts a suicide bomber's assassination of a fictional Sri Lankan president, recalling President Ranasinghe Premedasa's death in similar circumstances on May 1, 1993. Many local references--to cuisine, clothing, architectural details--are left untranslated. So whatever its wider relevance, specific geographical, linguistic, and cultural details remind the reader that Anil's Ghost wrestles with a real history and politics and should not be read simply as a fable about terrorism in the tropics.

Moreover, a brief look at Sri Lanka's recent history suggests that Ondaatje's unwillingness to take sides or offer solutions may owe as much to local conditions as to postmodernist theory. That is, the politics of Sri Lanka, even as described by the methodical social scientist Jagath Senaratne in his 1997 Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1977-1990, seem to reflect back postmodern notions of the collapse of grand narratives, the fragility and impermanence of identity, the failure of history to provide us with a coherent account of our origins, and the moral ambiguities of action and character in a world where cause and effect are endlessly complex. True, Senaratne's Sri Lanka has some of the problems found in other postcolonial countries torn apart by terrorism; he identifies some government policies and decisions that exacerbated these problems, and can point to a few recognizable events and dates with identifiable consequences. He points, for example, to a sharp ethnic split between a largely Hindu, Tamil-speaking minority (about 18% of the population) and Buddhist speakers of Sinhala who, at about 70% of the population, constitute its largest single ethnic group. The Sinhala-majority government radicalized the Tamil opposition by declaring Sinhala the nation's only official language in 1956, and thereby reducing the number of civil service positions open to Tamils. A 1972 decision to weight entrance examination scores in favor of students from rural or outlying districts reduced the number of Tamils admitted to university. Finally, the newly elected Sinhala United National Party government decided in late 1982 to substitute a December referendum for the parliamentary elections scheduled for 1983. By doing so, it circumvented a system of proportional representation established in the 1978 constitution, maintaining the two-thirds majority that allowed it to control the legislature and change the constitution at will (Senaratne 25-40). The killing in July 1983 of thirteen Sinhalese members of the Sri Lankan army by the Tigers (Tamil guerillas) was another landmark event. At a mass funeral for the victims in Colombo, some 10,000 mourners began rioting; burning and looting Tamil neighborhoods, they touched off similar violence throughout the country. At the end of the week, some 1000 Tamil people were dead, with another 100,000 to 200,000 left homeless. The several days the police and army
waited to take "concerted action to quell the rioting" and frequent sightings of looters riding about in government vehicles left even moderate Tamils feeling "betrayed by the ... state" (45, 46). Moreover, the government's subsequent loss of credibility with international aid organizations and potential investors further damaged the economy.

But these relatively solid historical facts do not suggest the extent to which Sri Lanka's ethnic groups are divided among themselves. Although the government is Sinhalese, the "antigovernment insurgents" Ondaatje mentions are primarily Sinhalese as well, members of the JVP (People's Liberation Front), a radical movement bent not only on abolishing private wealth and state institutions such as the judiciary and the army, but on eliminating political parties, trade unions, and student organizations (104, 105). Although the Tigers speak of Tamil speakers as a unified ethnic bloc, they belong to two distinct economic and social groups that seldom intermarry (23). About two-thirds, "Sri Lanka Tamils," trace their roots in the country back for centuries; traditionally urban and high-caste, they are geographically and economically distinct from "upcountry Tamils," descendants of South Indians whom the British hired as plantation workers in the nineteenth century. To add to the complexity, the Indian government deployed some 100,000 "peace-keeping" soldiers in Sri Lanka between 1987 and 1990, thus internationalizing the civil war.

With so many parties to the conflict, "undisciplined police and armed forces" had many opportunities to wreak violence on property and people, and persons with private quarrels or criminal purposes "carried out murders and robberies while masquerading as guerillas" (147). (FN1) As an Amnesty International report put it, "Violence is now [1989] so widespread that it is often difficult to establish with certainty who the agents of specific killings were--or even to identify the victims whose bodies are sometimes grossly mutilated, burned to ashes or transported long distances from the scene of arrests or abduction before being dumped" (qtd. in Senaratne 146). Moral distinctions and political solutions may be difficult to discern in any war, but this literal inability to identify the victims or agents of violence makes an agency report on Sri Lanka read like a postmodern text. Similar passages in Anil's Ghost demand that we remember how much "postmodernity" inheres in the situation itself: "It was a Hundred Years' War with modem weaponry, and backers on the sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by gun- and drug-runners. It became evident that political enemies were secretly joined in financial arms deals. 'The reason for war was war'" (43 sic).

Into this setting of intractable and largely incomprehensible violence, Ondaatje brings a Westernized outsider, Anil Tissera, a forensic anthropologist who has spent the last fifteen years in Britain and America. As a UN human rights investigator, she is grudgingly permitted to return to her homeland for seven weeks on the condition that she work with a local archaeologist, Sarath Diyasena. Her story, then, has the potential limits of one of those films shot from the perspective of an English or American visitor to a violent Third World country. When the visitor leaves, as Sarath's brother, Gamini, puts it, "the camera leaves with him"; for the West, the "war is over" (285). Because her name appears in the title, and the early chapters are seen from her perspective, she initially seems to be the central character; but as the book goes on the Diyasena brothers assume greater importance; reversing the film cliche, Ondaatje drops her from the narrative as soon as she heads for the airport. Yet though she is not finally the novel's center, Anil is the means by which he introduces many of the novel's themes. Some of these arise from the cultural shock of return to a place and language she had walled off after divorcing her Sinhala-speaking husband and
losing both of her parents in a car wreck; some arise from her temperament and circumstances, others from her profession.

As a forensic anthropologist, Anil has worked in places that make her acutely aware of "the billions of years in which contemporary cosmology calculates the age of the earth and the universe" (Heise 7). One of her "tenderest discoveries" was the "almost-four million-year old footsteps of a pig, a hyena, a rhinoceros and a bird" at Laetoli in Tanzania (55). Working in Arizona, she walked "on atolls left from ocean days seven million years earlier"; she thinks of her friend Leaf living near the Very Large Array telescopes in New Mexico, "alongside these receivers of the huge history of the sky" (149, 255). Heise finds such consciousness of "radically different time scales," geological eons side by side with the "nano-seconds of the computer," a major source of the "chronoschisms" of postmodern fiction (7). Anil's tenderness toward the ancient footprints suggests wonder at their accidental preservation but she has no impulse to put them into any explanatory framework, let alone a narrative. Indeed the novel's short chapters evoke her life through brief scenes and images, and Anil herself finds the greatest fidelity to experience in gestures and images: "There are no words Anil knows that can describe, even for just herself the woman's face. But the grief of love in that shoulder she will not forget, still remembers" (7).

Indeed there seems to be an inverse relationship between the scale of catastrophe and what can be said about it. The anthropologist's paradox is that "the most precisely recorded moments of history lay adjacent to the extreme actions of nature or civilization ... Pompeii. Laetoli. Hiroshima. ... Tectonic slips and brutal human violence provided random time-capsules of unhistorical lives" (55). Yet the "gardener's shadow in Hiroshima" does not tell a story: "there could never be any logic to the human violence without the distance of time" (55). Ondaatje implies not just that the victim does not have time to get into a debate about how many casualties a U.S. land invasion of Japan would have created, but that any time we do so, we are moving away from the victim's experience, to which "no one could ever give meaning" (55). Constructing meaning does not open a "door to escape grief and fear" for the survivors of catastrophe: "those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was the way to abandon emotion, a last protection for the self" (55, 56).

From the beginning, then, Anil and the reader understand that "nobody ... was very hopeful" about what she could accomplish in Sri Lanka. Nor does her partnership with the archaeologist Sarath Diyasena augur well: she worries about his ties to the government and he suspects that her fifteen years in the West will make her as useless as "one of those journalists who file reports about flies and scabs while staying at the Galle Face Hotel" (44). When he insists that she have a look at some bones recently excavated from a sixth century monastic site, she is annoyed at their irrelevance--"she hadn't come here to deal with the Middle Ages" (20). Yet within minutes she realizes that one of the bone fragments is contemporary, suggesting that someone is using the ancient site to conceal recent victims. Since the state-controlled archaeological site is under constant police supervision, the government's responsibility is indisputable. Anil proposes--as we suspect but do not know that Sarath wishes her to do--that they go to the site, find the body of a recent victim, and identify it. We may infer that a U.N. human rights commission could put pressure on the government if it had scientific proof of its guilt, but Ondaatje never spins out the scenario. What seems more important to Anil is to name the victim, to make him a representative of all the "unhistorical dead": "To give him a name would name the rest" (56).
The ethical obligation to name is part of Anil’s scrupulous sense that "permanent truths, the same for Colombo as Troy" lurk in knowable details, and that such truths "set you free" (64, 102). As a forensic pathologist, she searches for trace minerals that tell where the body was buried the first time, before it was moved; for tiny indentations in its bones that identify the parasite that stripped its flesh, for the subtle deformities that reveal the person’s occupation. But names are powerful talismans for Anil, who won her masculine name by taking it away from her brother when she was fourteen. Shouting her married lover's name from an open window, "Hey, listen everybody--I've got the science writer Cullis Wright in my car," was more than a way to embarrass him; it was an attempt to help him break free (264). When Sarath's brother, Gamini, tells her about the suicide of the lover who had also been his sister-in-law, Anil asks what her name was. Wondering if she wants to tell his brother, Gamini asks, "What would you do with her name?" (253). The question hangs in the air unanswered; we know that for Anil the name is a fact, a permanent truth that separates this woman from all the "unhistorical dead." But what to do with this truth? Anil's medical training enables her to discover the name of the victim she and Sarath found, but what anyone will do with the words "Ruwan Kumara" is unclear.

As well-trained in science as Anil is, Sarath "can read a bucket of soil as if it were a complex historical novel" (151). But as the metaphor suggests, he is much more of a humanist, considering an archaeologist the "link between the mortality of flesh and bone and the immortality of an image on rock" (278). Where Anil looks for permanent truths in the chemical traces that survive in bones, Sarath insists that truth is inseparable from life; "for the living" truth is "in character and nuance and mood" (259). Anil's objection that these are only "what governs us in our lives" is meaningless for a man who sees the most durable artifacts sharing humanity's fragility, so that the "dropping off of arms and hands of rock as a result of the fatigue of centuries ... existed alongside human fate" (279). Like an old-fashioned historian, he values the narrative dimension of the past; an archaeologist moves a stone "and there's a story" (259). Knowing the context, the rest of the story, is the only way to understand an artifact; early in their acquaintance, he insists that Anil learn the details of Sri Lanka's recent political history, the "archaeological surround of a fact" that Westerners usually miss (44). Without this context, even accurate information is dangerous, as when the foreign press publish isolated facts with "irrelevant photographs" that "lead ... to new vengeance and slaughter" (157). But Sarath's eye for the longue durée suggests to his brother Gamini, a surgeon, a certain cynicism, or at least a lack of commitment to the present: "he's ... the one in our family with historical irony. We are prime examples for him of why cities become ruins" (192). And even Palipana, the great archaeologist with whom Sarath studied, says that "to be loved with the irony of history--that isn't much" (12).

As forensic anthropologist and archaeologist, scientist and humanist, work out Ruman Kumara's identity, they enlist the help of a handful of people, victims of terrorism, whom Sarath can trust. Palipana is the first of these. Now an old man, he was once a leading member of the first generation of Sri Lankan archaeologists, who wished to preserve what was left of their cultural heritage after the depredations of their Japanese and European predecessors. He first appears in a brief italicized passage lecturing about Cave 14, the site of a once beautiful Buddhist temple in Shanxi province. All of the original twenty-four Bodhisattivas had been cut out of the walls with axes and saws to be shipped to distant museums, a "complete crime" that left red edges "suggesting the wound's incision" (12). At the end, of course, the memory of this colonial crime adds another level of historical irony to
the postcolonial demolition of the Buddha. But in the beginning it explains Palipana's habit of talking to stonemasons and dhobi women in the villages near his excavations; not only does he respect the continuity of local culture, but "a pragmatic awareness of locally inherited skills" enables him to see details the outsider would miss. Ondaatje does not spell out Palipana's political commitments beyond noting the connection between ethnocentric archaeology and Sri Lanka's "nationalistic fervour," which he "rode and used" (80) in the interests of his discipline.

Brother of a monk shot to death while asleep in a commune he had organized for unemployed youth, Palipana, in his old age, has adopted an ascetic life near Ritigala, sleeping on one of the meditation platforms that mark the site of an ancient monastery. His only companion is his niece Lakma, whom he rescued from a government ward for orphans of the civil war. After witnessing the murder of her parents, the little girl had regressed into infancy, terrified of "the evidence of anything human" (104). With great gentleness, he teaches her basic skills, such as the alphabet, but he also talks to her "at the furthest edge of his knowledge and beliefs" (104). The damaged child listens as he tells her about "how history faded too, as much as battle did ... for even the slokas on papyrus and bound ole leaves would be eaten by moths ... how only stone and rock could hold one person's loss and another beauty forever" (105). She has no way of distinguishing between the stories he tells her, no way of knowing what is speculation; as she listens to him, "he blended fragments of stories so they became a landscape" (105). As his eyesight fails, she takes over their lives and cares for him with the same gentleness he had shown her. When he is dying, explains the narrator in one of the text's two references to the future, Lakma will spend a week carving a sentence of his into an outcropping of rock in the tank at Kaludiya Pokuna, in imitation of the monks whose runes he had translated for her. The text doesn't tell us what the sentence says, only that she had clung to it in the terror of her early weeks with him and that "it still appears and disappears" (107).

Though removing Lakma from the terrors of civil war helps her to heal, Palipana understands that his brother's death proves that no retreat assures safety, that "passion or slaughter" come after the person who renounces them (103). His move to the remote monastic ruins has another motivation, for the great scholar has suffered public disgrace from the recent disclosure that his influential translations of rock graffiti were fraudulent. Like Baudrillard's "hyper-real," the "linguistic subtext that explained the political tides and royal eddies of the island in the sixth century" was a copy for which no original could be found (81). Why has this ascetic scholar ended his career with a forgery that betrayed "the principles on which he had built his reputation?" (82). The narrator entertains the possibility of a psychic collapse, but suggests the more interesting hypothesis that the old man had simply taken his method a step further, "the last stage of a long, truthful dance" (81). Famous for using his knowledge of the techniques of local stonemasons to help him locate the precise place where his team should dig to find the foundations of an ancient wall, he started to draw "parallels and links between the techniques of stonemasons he met with in Matara and the work he had done during the years of translating texts ... " (83). He began to see patterns, intuit links between disparate artifacts that he could never establish scientifically; in no way did this new "unprovable truth" seem to him "like forgery or falsification" (83).

Confronted with fragments, ruins, gaps in time, Palipana moves, like a romantic historian, to fill in the imagined whole. Like the romantic, or the mystic whom he resembles, Palipana
comes to believe that this imagined and coherent version embodies a transcendent truth. Losing a brother and sister to contemporary terrorism is surely enough to confirm his belief that in some periods people do not dare tell the truth about their public history. In such times, is it not logical to believe that the true story is "hidden ... intentionally lost"? (105). Sarath suspects that Palipana, as his vision failed, believed that at last he could see "the half-perceived interlinear texts" in the ancient inscriptions, much as colour-blind people see through camouflage "to the existing structure of the figure" (191). Thus he is certain that he can read "an illegal story, one banned by kings and state and priests, in the interlinear texts" (105). Anil and Sarath and, we might say Michael Ondaatje too, are attempting to uncover a deliberately concealed story. Palipana's desire to recover a suppressed history is, therefore, one with which the text is entirely sympathetic. Yet that is what it remains for the novel, the deep-rooted desire of a good and learned man; Ondaatje does not give readers the information they would need to assess Palipana's narrative; indeed he does not even summarize it. In this respect Anil's Ghost is distinctly at odds with such contemporary British novels as A.S. Byatt's Possession or Margaret Drabble's Gates of Ivory, which Suzanne Keen defines as "romances of the archives," in which a researcher undertakes "an exciting quest which will end pleasurably, in the discovery of a truth" about the past that "not only fascinates, but ... yields tangible benefits ... " (42). Such a recoverable past, with its ability to instruct or console, is beyond the reach of Ondaatje's characters.

Although an archaeologist, Palipana, as we noted, fits a romantic conception of the artist, and in keeping with this persona, he recommends that Anil and Sarath find a local artist to help them identify their skeleton by rebuilding its face. They find Ananda, who gave up art to work in a gem mine after terrorists killed his wife; day after day, his work done, he drinks arrack until he collapses. Before Sirissa's death, he practiced the traditional art of N[super-]etra Mangala, the ritual painting of the eyes on a holy figure; with the painting of the eyes, the statue or painting comes alive, so that what was previously a lump of stone or metal "is thenceforward a God" (97). Palipana's description of the ancient ritual evokes claims that in the West romantics and modernists made about art: "The artificer brings to life sight and truth and presence" (99). Ananda's task, then, is to produce a reasonable approximation of the victim's face from his skull, a task that in different circumstances might be accomplished with a computer-generated model. What he produces, however, is not the face of Ruwan Kumara but a younger face from which radiates what both Sarath and Anil recognize as "a peacefulness he wanted for any victim" (187). But Palipana's intervention leads to the identity of the skeleton all the same; watching Ananda at work, Anil realizes that he is squatting in a painful way that is bound to produce a permanent mark on the bone. When the artist explains that he grew used to this position in the mines, Anil has an occupational marker, an explanation for distinctive strictures on the skeleton's ankle bones. This last clue leads the team to check for information about men missing from plumbago-graphite mines in the region; they find their name in the third village they visit.

If Anil, Palipana, Sarath and even Ananda are all in some way focused on history, or on forensic pathology, or on beloved persons lost to terrorism, Gamini the surgeon "has chosen not to deal with the dead" (213). Sarath introduces his brother to Anil more than a third of the way through the book, and as the narrative continues Gamini and his fraught relationship with Sarath play an increasingly significant role. Like Ananda and Palipana's niece Lakma, Gamini is visibly traumatized by war; in addition to years spent trying to repair the horrifically wounded victims who crowd the emergency services of his hospital, he has
endured the collapse of his marriage and the suicide of his lover. Like other doctors in the novel, he has no political commitments, and works as hard when kidnapped by Tamil guerillas to care for their wounded as he does when he cares for their victims in the state hospital. Like a figure from the literature of the Great War, Ernest Hemingway or Robert Graves, he turns away not only from war and nationalism, but from the principles and abstractions used to justify them, rejecting even "pride of ownership or ... personal rights. All of those motives ended up somehow in the arms of careless power" (119). Addicted to pills that Anil identifies as "speed," Gamini survives by immersing himself in his work; if his brother values the long view, he values the opposite, finding a "state of grace" in the "storm of the last stages of a party or in the chaos of emergency wards." In this state "people could lose themselves as if in a dance, too intent on skills or desires to be conscious of their power" (223).

Gamini's addiction to amphetamines of course fits Heise's postmodern vision of human beings adapting themselves to the speeding up of the "product life cycle," the "accelerated temporal rhythms of late-capitalist technologies of production and consumption" (22, 6). It is tempting to think of him as a man evolved to fit a pace set by instantaneous global satellite television transmission or electronic information retrieval. At the same time, of course, he's a selfless healer, an archetype with Christian associations Ondaatje explicitly rewrites. When Sarath and Anil, en route to Colombo, find a truck driver nailed to the tarmac, they take him to Gamini, who cleans and bandages his hands. But Gamini can't find a hospital bed for a patient with such relatively minor injuries: "See, even crucifixion isn't a major assault nowadays ... " (130). Near the end of the book Gamini, holding his brother's lifeless body, characterizes the scene as "a pieta among brothers" (288). In both cases, it is the victim who bears comparison to Christ, with the metaphor suggesting a certain reluctance to celebrate the physician in a place where healing is uncertain and its consequences ambiguous. At least some of the victims of terrorism will recover only to resume terrorizing others, the reason perhaps that the omniscient narrator calls Gamini "a perfect participant in the war" (224).

The public and political struggles of these characters mirror their personal ones; none of the major characters has a living spouse or lover; no one has children; the only communities in which we see the characters function are the temporary ones formed by healthcare workers in an emergency ward or by an international team of scientists working on the same project. Ondaatje noted that after publishing the book, he became aware of how everything in it kept coming back to the theme of "separations. It's almost as though love is gone; it's a very celibate book .... everything was in the past or repressed" (Wasafiri 7). While some of these losses and separations are a direct result of civil war and terrorism, others have no political content at all, yet are seen as equally painful: "One can die from private woes as easily as from public ones" (202).

Those remembered relationships seem fraught with misery, if not actual violence. Sarath's wife fell in love with his brother, with whom she had an affair; Gamini was on duty the night she was brought into the emergency room because she had swallowed lye; he could not save her. The brothers' relationship had been a "secret war" since childhood (221). Anil's affair with Cullis Wright ended fiercely. During their last meeting, he grasped a handful of her hair, resisting her pleas for release. She reached over with a small knife and stabbed him in the arm; refusing to "step back from her fury," she left him on the spot: "she would continue the war" (100; 263). In two paragraphs set during an unspecified time in Gamini's
childhood we see him with an air rifle, wearing a camouflage hat, and crawling toward his aunt's veranda on his belly, "like a sniper" (226). There is no narrative to explain how he got there; he wants to shoot out the flame of a candle he has placed on a side table a yard or so away from his aunt and her bridge-playing friends; when his aunt looks up he is "aiming right at them" and a pellet hits the friend in the ankle (226). Such relatively minor acts of violence in private life lead Anil to despair of an end to political terrorism: "If two lovers felt they could kill themselves over loss or desire, what of the rest of the planet of strangers?" (202).

Anil's close friendship--perhaps it is something more--with another woman, a fellow pathologist, Leaf Niedecker, further illustrates the failure of private life to serve as a refuge. The two of them envelope themselves in a private nostalgic world that recreates mid-twentieth century America; they go bowling, take long drives in the desert, and watch the John Ford and Fred Zinnemann films that played in the drive-in theaters of Leaf's youth. They especially enjoy putting their professional expertise to work on the movies, speculating for hours about what kind of bullet wound to the torso would leave Lee Marvin strong enough to swim from Alcatraz to San Francisco. It is a satisfying relationship, reflecting the escapist humor that in Anil's experience characterizes forensic labs and enables pathologists to resist morbidity. Leaf's rather too poetic first name links her, however, to an image Ondaatje uses throughout the book for transience and vulnerability: the leaf roof under which Palipana and Lakma sleep in the Grove of the Ascetics, the "small yellow leaf" that floats down and "pulses" in the ribs of Kumara's skeleton, the "leaf-wrapped meal" that Sirissa eats at school the day before her murder (84, 170, 173). Poignantly, a childhood case of encephalitis has predisposed Leaf to develop Alzheimer's at an early age. As Anil combats the obliteration of identity and cultural memory in Sri Lanka, she is losing her best friend to an incurable disease that obliterates these in the human brain. Leaf is forgetting Anil's face; she no longer knows who shot Cherry Valance, she does not recognize the name "John Wayne" (63, 256).

Though private life provides at best an insecure refuge, stepping into public life means stepping into certain danger. Once Anil and Sarath have Ruwan Kumara's identity, scientific inquiry is at an end; leaving Anil in the countryside, Sarath returns to Colombo to see if he can find Kumara's name on a government enemies' list. When she has not heard from him in a week, she telephones a doctor, a frightened former colleague of her late father's, who sends a car to bring her and the skeleton back to the capital. Officials immediately separate her from the skeleton, and although she is permitted to report to some police and counter-insurgency experts in an anti-terrorism unit, she realizes that without evidence her findings will have no real value. But she soldiers on, refusing to be baited, taping every word of her testimony. Sarath watches silently from the back row, noting that after fifteen years' absence she has finally begun to identify with Sri Lankans: "I think you murdered hundreds of us" (272). Realizing how hostile this audience has become, Sarath interrupts, pretending to dispute Anil's findings and finally challenging her to examine an ancient skeleton to see if she can really distinguish it from a contemporary one. She's hustled out of the room, her tape recorder confiscated, with her former colleague warning her not to attempt to return.

Sarath has not, however, gone over to the government side; he has planned a way for Anil to escape with some of their findings. The skeleton he wheels off to her lab is in fact Ruwan Kumara's, as she quickly recognizes; she will have a night to reconstitute her notes before Gunesena, the crucifixion victim they had rescued from the tarmac, drives her to an early
flight. As for Sarath, he will have only a short time to ponder the implications of his treason. He had always been a pragmatist, believing "as an archaeologist ... in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use" (157). He has had no illusions about his courage; has never been able to examine his marriage: "he would unearth nothing of Ravina ... he was ... unable to step back to the trauma of that place ... " (279). But in assisting Anil's research and her flight he has taken an irrevocable step: "he had returned to the intricacies of the public world .... He knew he would not be forgiven that" (279).

When Anil disappears, the narrative moves to Gamini, in his office, turning through the black-and-white photographs of victims that a civil rights organization brings to him every Friday afternoon. When he reaches the third photograph, he recognizes his brother's body by its "innocent wounds," the scars from a childhood biking accident and a fight with a cricket stump. And though he is a man who has chosen not to deal with the dead, Gamini realizes that he must do so now, that if he does not talk to his brother "at this moment, his brother would disappear from his life" (288). So he begins a "permanent conversation" with this brother who had always been his rival, but who in death is simply what he is, "no longer a counter of argument, no longer an opinion that Gamini refused to accept" (289). The metaphor of the pieta, which we have noted earlier, conveys grief but also in this case a strong sexuality: Gamini reflects that there are many pietas. One of these is the story of the Hindu princess Savitra who wrestled Yama, the god of death, to bring her husband back to life; the other is a remembered glimpse of Ravina in a post-coital embrace with his brother.

The brothers' tormented relationship might be dismissed as an easy metaphor for their country, the "borderland of civil war among governments and terrorists and insurgents" that Ondaatje explicitly evokes during this scene (289). But another clue is provided earlier, when the narrator notes that the brothers' conflict began "with the desire to be the other" (221). What might it mean for a surgeon to wish to be an archaeologist and historian? Gamini suggests one possibility when he recounts his admiration for Palipana's skill at deciphering ancient epigraphs: "Wonderful! To study history as if it were a body" (193). For Gamini that is the fantasy, to have the kind of knowable, provable truth about history that the study of anatomy yields about the body. But if a historian could be a surgeon, what would that mean? Perhaps that history, like human physiology, could yield a systematic account of its functions, or even that the body politic could be healed.

These, of course, are not fantasies that the novel makes real. However, Ondaatje insists that a thorough account of contemporary reality must reconfigure the old boundaries. When neither the austerities of monastic life nor the comforts of middle-brow American pop culture offer refuge, the boundary between private and public fates collapses. Global citizens such as Anil are a new model of the human being; Ondaatje quotes a line from the poet Robert Duncan: "The drama of our time is the coming of all men into one fate" (203). Even the boundary between history and the human body is changing. Ondaatje quotes another North American writer, Anne Carson: "I wanted to find one law to cover all of living. I found fear ... " (135). Yet where is fear? Anil reflects that anatomy offers one answer, the "almond knot" of nerve cell fibers that makes up the amygdala. This English word sounds Sri Lankan to her the first time she hears it in a London hospital. The amygdala, according to her professor, is "pure emotion": it is not clear where the fears in which it specializes originate. But whether they are ancestral fears, or fears from childhood, Anil believes they are historical: "created and made by us, by our own history" (135). And this "nerve bundle
governs everything” (136).

The last vignette in the novel, "Distance," like so many of the earlier ones, is almost self-contained, with no transition to tell the reader if it takes place a few months or a few years after Sarath's murder. Ananda has returned to Netra Mangala; he has been commissioned to paint the eyes in the reconstructed Buddha. But there's no sense of perfect restoration. He's rejected an early plan to fuse the rock and "homogenize the stone"; instead he has left it looking "scarred" and "damaged" (302, 307). All his energy goes into creating the "composure" we saw in his reconstruction of Ruwan Kumara's skull. In the end the statue will "be no longer a god" and will no longer have a "graceful line but only the pure sad glance Ananda had found" (307). No longer a traditional Buddhist, he no longer celebrates "the greatness of a faith" (304). Moreover, in the Western modernist vocabulary Ondaatje had introduced earlier, he no longer believes in art: "it was a long time since he had believed in the originality of artists" (303).

Ananda continues to be an "artificer" because if he did not "he would become a demon," one of the "spectres of retaliation" that keep the war going around him (304). As he climbs the ladder to the Buddha's head, he is wearing an old shirt of Sarath's with his sarong, a recognition that "he and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena" (305). One cannot say in any simple way what it is to carry Sarath's ghost, but surely he is partly the ghost of history, and that "irony of history" with which his brother associated him. He is what prevents art from becoming as timeless as artists wish it to be, what shadows the scientist who wishes to explain the world in provable truths. Perhaps too he is a relic of some liberal humanism, this benign and pragmatic man whose courageous decision the text does not attempt to explain. The omniscient narrator tells us that Sarath's last thought when he interrupted Anil's report was that "he had somehow to protect himself"; the next time we enter Sarath's consciousness, he knows perfectly well that there is no forgiveness for people who do what he has just done (272, 279). The text's reticence suggests such decisions are made rapidly, without prolonged agonizing, perhaps without conscious thought, as the outcome of a life. Certainly self-effacement, suffering, and a scrupulous respect for truth were habitual with Sarath.

Ursula Weise is surely right to emphasize all of the ways in which the global electronic revolution has speeded up our sense of time even as astronomers provide new evidence of the length of our history. Ondaatje's juxtaposition of temporal scales, the prehistoric footstep and the satellite transmission of voices across continents, reflects this postmodern reality. But traditional Buddhist culture also suggests the necessity of the eccentric perspective and the celerity of the spirit's movement. Sarath and Anil bring Ananda to an old country house, a walawwa, to reconstruct the victim's face. It had once belonged to an artist, who lived there for a time, and Anil will always be able to recognize the walawwa's aesthetic when she sees it in one of the artist's drawings (202). Ananda chooses to work in a room where two Sinhala words are written on the wall, suggesting that they characterize that aesthetic: makamkruka and madanaraga, Sarath explains: a "makamkruka is a churner, an agitator. Someone who perhaps sees things more truly by turning everything upside down." Though in some sense he's almost a "devil," he "guards the sacred spot in a temple ground" (165). As for "madanaraga," it is word from ancient romances that means "'with the speed of love,' sexual arousal" (165).

These are qualities with which the book acquaints us: we can associate makamkruka with Ananda and the ritual painting of the eyes that make a statue into a god, but also with Anil's
patient search for the smallest detail, the most obscure anomaly, that will name the anonymous victim. Madanaraga evokes Gamini's view that the intensity of a surgical staff during a crisis, when no one has time to be conscious of having power, is a "state of grace." And it certainly evokes the impulse, too swift to be narrated, that transforms Sarath from a cautious and pragmatic scholar into a hero who has already given his life for truth, even though the outcome of his sacrifice is unknowable. These examples illustrate Ondaatje's skill at reconfiguring the postmodern sense of time, the time of the chronoschism, so that it acquires human possibilities not usually associated with information traveling at the speed of light. One of the novel's most remarkable accomplishments is that its faithfulness to a time and place of seemingly intractable violence does not produce a cynical account of human nature. As we have seen, Ondaatje seems to assume the failure of a progressive historical narrative, making no attempt to project fictional solutions to terrorism and guerilla war. That nothing lasts, that granite monuments crumble, seems to drive him to value the briefest fragments of time, to respect the moment of absolute love or generosity, the flash of intuition, the graceful walk of a young woman who will not survive another day. The artist's ability to identify fragments of beauty and nobility, even in times of terror, matches the scientist's ability to identify "permanent truths, the same for Troy as for Colombo," in the mineral traces of a soil sample. From the height where he will paint the Buddha's eyes, Ananda glimpses birds diving between the trees, "the tiniest of hearts in them beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her, in the vacuum of her disappearance" (307). Such thoughts had once led him to despair, but the thought of her "small brave heart" now offers an austere consolation.

ADDED MATERIAL
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FOOTNOTES
1 Senaratne analyzes fourteen "separate strands of violence" in Sri Lankan politics between 1987 and 1990, ranging from revolutionaries' conflicts with the government to their conflicts with civilians in the groups they claimed to represent, and third parties such as Muslims and Christians. Amnesty International's report for 2002 takes note of a formal cease-fire agreement between the government and the Tigers that came into force on 23 February. The peace process, supervised by representatives of the Nordic countries, continues into 2003. Amnesty notes that a "major improvement in human rights" has been offset by continuing accusations of torture in police custody and lack of accountability for "disappearances." The Tigers continue to take hostages and recruit child soldiers.
2 The narrator calls Leaf Anil's "closest friend," in distinction to Cullis, who is clearly identified as her lover. However, the language used about their relationship ("assumed she'd abandoned her," "snapshot ... of the two of them dancing at some party," "they'd wake up at three in the morning entangled in each other's arms") suggests something more (254). "Niedecker" is presumably for the Canadian Objectivist poet Lorine Niedecker (1903-1970), known for her "aesthetic of condensation." See Penberthy.
3 In The Red River, a 1948 Western directed by Howard Hawks and starring John Wayne; John Ireland played Cherry Valance.
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