

Prologue

Between Two Women

A voice involves the throat, saliva, infancy, the patina of experienced life, the mind's intentions, the pleasure of giving a personal form to sound waves. What attracts you is the pleasure this voice puts into existing.

Italo Calvino, *A King Listens*

In the midst of a Thanksgiving dinner, with people splayed out on the floor—a middle-aged man with his back against the legs of a chair recounting a road trip across the southern United States, a teenager twisting her hair around her finger and gazing inertly in front of her, a couple of kids lying on their stomachs, engrossed in their own densely laid world of right and wrong—and everyone eating and talking and bickering as most families, happy or sad, eat and talk and bicker, in the midst of all that, two women face each other. The younger one is kneeling on the floor at the feet of the old woman, a woman whose legs can no longer support her weight, a woman who has been lifted from a car into the house and placed on the living room couch. The two women bring their faces close together—so close they are almost touching, their arms resting on each other's shoulders. They sway slightly as they begin to *kataq*. The younger woman starts, and the sounds she makes come from the back of her throat, low and thick, almost growling.

Ham ma ham ma, ham ma, ham ma—she breathes in and out in a steady rhythm, intensely, her vocal cords bruising each other. Buzzing, panting, the older woman's voice comes in and moves up and down as if plucking the lower rhythm, teasing it almost. The sounds and rhythms pass from body to body, echoing and playing with each other, growling,

buzzing, yelping. There's something machine-like and modern about the sounds, which are also archaic and guttural.

Ham me, ham ma, ma, ham ma, ham ma, ham ma

Ha ha ha, ha he he, ha he he, ha he he ha ha ha ha

Then the old lady breaks off and cackles loudly, hooting almost. The younger woman laughs too and wipes away tears. People smile, clap, and go back to what they were doing.

A few months later the old lady dies in her sleep. I am in the house when the young woman returns, but I've already heard the news. I hear her shutting the door, putting down her purse. The ordinariness of the sounds is hard. "She's gone," the young woman tells me, thinking I don't know. "My *anaana* is gone." In my memory it's as if she is swaying, but not rhythmically, rather as if she might fall over.