Tricycle Talks
"Picking Up the Pieces in a Postapocalyptic World"
Episode #113 with Vajra Chandrasekera
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Vajra Chandrasekera: Personally, I like to think of apocalypse as something that happened a long time ago, and we are all living in a postapocalyptic world. So for me, the really important thing is that you have to keep picking up the pieces and that we have to keep picking up each other in this postapocalyptic world because that may be all that you can do. In many situations, you do not have the power to make change at the level that you might wish to. But even if you cannot make change at the level that you most deeply desire to, I think it's the effort of doing it anyway is what matters. I don't think the sense of defeat or loss that apocalypse, quote unquote, apocalypse suggests, I don't think it precludes searching for the revolution in every incarnation that you have.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Vajra Chandrasekera. Vajra is a novelist based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. His new novel, *Rakesfall*, follows two characters as they're reincarnated across histories and worlds from the mythic past to modern Sri Lanka to the far future Earth through endless epicycles of love, violence, and betrayal. In my conversation with Vajra, we talk about the weaponization of religious myths in Sri Lankan Buddhism, how the novel experiments with classical forms of Hindu and Buddhist epics, why he describes himself as an "unbuddhist," and the role of haunting and possession in his work. So here's my conversation with Vajra Chandrasekera.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with novelist Vajra Chandrasekera. Hi, Vajra. It's great to be with you.

Vajra Chandrasekera: Hi, thanks for having me.

James Shaheen: So, Vajra, we're here to talk about your new novel, *Rakesfall*, which follows two characters as they're reincarnated across histories and worlds. The book in some ways defies easy categorization or description, to say the least. So, to start off, how would you describe *Rakesfall*, and what inspired you to write it?

Vajra Chandrasekera: *Rakesfall* is a project that I've been working on for a while. I feel like fiction has approached the problem of reincarnation before. Both in speculative fiction and in literary fiction, it's been done. But I've never been entirely satisfied with how it's done. So I thought I would, I wanted to do my own take on it both as a mechanism and as kind of a driving motive force for the story itself.

James Shaheen: OK, so while the book was published as a science fiction novel, it spans a number of genres and includes parables, fables, creation myths, descriptions of a TV show, a play, and even instructions for a game. Could you tell us a bit about how you're experimenting with genre?

Vajra Chandrasekera: Yeah, one of the ways in which I wanted to talk about reincarnation in the first place was the idea that selfhood is a lot more permeable than is generally, I think, considered acceptable in fiction, where you're expected to have a single main character who you can follow through or a single set of main characters, whereas in this story, things are a little messier than that. One of the ways in which I wanted to reflect that in the book's structure was to have these kinds of transformations in each incarnation of the register and the style and the genre of the text itself. So each chapter is not only the characters recurring in a different world or different universe or different setting; it's also a different style of story. So you can move from, for example, a murder mystery to a play.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you know, what personally I found interesting is that as I was reading along, I kept trying to get traction and to cling to some conventional narrative, and finally I let go and said, "OK, I'm going to enjoy the ride," and the porousness of self and the transformations

became a delight rather than a challenge. But you've described *Rakesfall* as genre dysphoric. What do you mean by that?

Vajra Chandrasekera: It's, I think, I don't actually know how intense these boundaries are seen from outside genre, but within genre fiction, within speculative fiction, the fine distinctions between the subcategories of science fiction, horror, fantasy, different kinds of fantasy are often very hard-fought borders because people, I think, get very attached to particular corner of form. One of the things that I actively wanted to fight against was this idea of a fixed set of genre boundaries in any particular area. I wanted to be able to move freely between different forms, to have a fluidity of genre. The words genre and gender, in any case, are etymologically related, so I feel like the same kind of fluidity applies in both cases, and what you described about needing to let go in order to actually enjoy the text, that is actually the exact reaction that I hoped readers would have, because I think that a lot of genre readers especially are trained to start cataloging and indexing in your head, kind of put it all together, figure out what the rules are, and then be able to predict what happens next based on your understanding of those rules: This is this kind of story; therefore, the next step will be something like that. So that is exactly the kind of expectation I wanted to flout, which does make things difficult for a reader who doesn't let go of the need to have that kind of control over their reading experience. But I do think it will be rewarding for people who are OK with letting go a little bit.

James Shaheen: Right, so, publishing being publishing, you did have to make a choice, and you chose to publish the book as science fiction. So how do you view the possibilities of science fiction as a genre?

Vajra Chandrasekera: I think it's actually odd because when I submitted this to the publisher, I pitched it as a fantasy novel, but at the time of publishing, they framed it as a science fiction novel. I can see why, because I think if you actually look at the story, there's quite a lot of it, especially towards the latter half, which is very science fictional. It involves the future and so forth, and climate change. It attempts to travel into the galaxy, that sort of thing, very science

fictional tropes. So I think their thinking was probably, of all the various things that are in this book, perhaps the most vivid is the science fictional focus. And I think that underscores why, for me, these distinctions are more of a marketing or frame decision. The frame is really about how a publisher thinks a book is best presented to the world.

For myself, as kind of an artistic position, as distinct from the marketing framework of it, I think what I like about speculative fiction broadly in any of its subgenres, science fiction included, is that it allows you to be free of constraint in what you want to depict. We can choose to depict not only times and places other than the ones we inhabit but also different kinds of personhood or selfhood. A great deal more play is acceptable, I think, in the more experimental speculative fiction. And there's less expectation of, I was going to say comprehensibility, but that's not quite the word. I think what I mean is availability, the way that a text becomes available to the reader. I think my take on this is perhaps a little different in any case, because I grew up reading a lot of fiction in English set in, for example, the US or in England. And for me, all of that was a bit science fictional anyway: Here is this fantasy other land, where the rules are very different, and everything that people experience is very different. And so I read, or at least I used to read, Western literary fiction as if it were a kind of fantasy novel, because I had to figure out the rules, figure out the terrain, figure out how things work, and all of these are things that are not actually in the text for the most part. These are things that are implicit to readers in the West, which a reader from outside the West has to figure out on the fly. So I think that for me is also why when I turn to writing I like to write speculative fiction in a way that incorporates a Sri Lankan setting, or a fairly conventional Sri Lanka. There are passages and sections of *Rakesfall*, which are very straightforwardly set in Sri Lanka in various periods, which a lot of speculative fiction readers do in fact respond to as if they were reading a fantasy world. And I think that shows the line between the kinds of reading that you do is less of a solid line than you might think, because depending on where your reader comes from, the difference of environment between the writer and the reader, what you can take as a given, the kind of assumptions that you can take for

granted. So, for me, speculative fiction is the form that gives you the most freedom in the sense that your reader is at least a little bit primed not to take anything for granted.

James Shaheen: You also play with traditional forms of Hindu epics and Buddhist parables, as the book includes retellings of the *Ramayana* and your own take on the Jataka tales or, for our listeners, the stories of the Buddha's past lives. So how are you experimenting with or subverting these classical forms?

Vajra Chandrasekera: One of the epics that I'm retelling slash subverting in *Rakesfall* is one of the later chapters from the *Kathasaritsagara*, which is, I believe, an 11th-century epic. It's an Indian epic, and the folklore in it is very Hindu, but the lines between those things are also very blurry in South Asia, in any case.

And the *Kathasaritsagara* is a story made up out of stories, which I think is also true of for example, the *Mahabharata*, or even the *Ramayana*. The form that these traditional South Asian epics take is often the story made out of stories because people tell each other stories which have some bearing on the plot. It's not really so much about the frame narrative, which is technically the main story of the epic, which is of course there, but there's great delight in getting nested deep into levels of story that people are telling inside the story, and that is a form that I really love, and something that I tried to recreate in my own way in this book, which is very much a story of stories, so my way of including this small nod to the *Ramayana*, my version of the *Ramayana* retelling in this book is extremely small. It's a direct reference, I think, to it only in one subsection, where I'm retelling the very initial part of the *Ramayana*, the reason. The *Ramayana* is a story of a war between Rama and Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, and the reason for the war is the very beginning of the story, obviously. So I have a slightly different take on how that war begins.

So in the same way that I retell one of the particular stories of the *Kathasaritsagara*, which is the story of the origin story, if you like, of a group of celestial beings called the *vidyadharas*, who

are I describe them in the book as the science gods at the end of time, the bearers of wisdom. So I found that a very compelling image because, well, it's nice to think of there being bearers of wisdom somewhere in history because they sure are not around right now. The end of history seemed like a good place to put it. It's aspirational.

James Shaheen: You know, you've talked about the ways that religious myths have been used as ideological weapons and can even determine the outcome of elections, which is much on our minds right now. Can you say more about the weaponization of myths? And how are religious myths used to manipulate political narratives?

Vajra Chandrasekera: Yeah, in Sri Lanka where I'm from, the demographically dominant religion is Buddhism, which is often framed in Sri Lanka as Sinhala Buddhism, which is racialized. And that is, I think, a version of what your listeners are probably familiar with as Hinayana or Theravada. And that version of Buddhism, the Sinhala Buddhism, is something that came out of late 19th-century anticolonial movements in Sri Lanka, in British Ceylon. But at that time it became formulated in a very racialized way locally. While it was about resisting the British Empire and colonization, it was also about the supremacy of the Sinhala ethnic group, the demographically dominant racial group on the island, at the expense of the island's minorities, the Tamil people and Muslim people.

Being Muslim in Sri Lanka is also racialized. It's seen as a racial category rather than as a religious one, and the reason that happens dates back to that same period, the mid to late 19th century, when British colonial censuses categorized various groups of this island as racial groups, regardless of their origin or their preceding self-definitions, and then allocated parliamentary power, representative power in government, based on those demographically determined racial categorizations.

So, since before independence, Sri Lanka had this connection between racial grouping, religious grouping, and political power. Upon independence, what happened was that Sinhala Buddhism

became a unifying force for the Sinhala people and a way to exert political power over the minorities on the island, which led to a considerable amount of violence. There were pogroms going back to the 1950s, as well as legally enforced discrimination at multiple levels, language rights, for example, or the disenfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of people who were then deported over the next twenty years to India, which culminated in the Sri Lankan civil war from the 1980s through 2009, which ended in the genocide.

So all of this was undergirded by a very strong Sinhala Buddhist ideological camp, which was represented both by actual Buddhist monks of all the various Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist nikayas, or sects, as well as a huge part of the political platform of any Sinhala politician who actually wanted to win had to make these claims to the protection of Buddhism.

So, the protection of Buddhism, quote unquote, is in our constitution. It was inserted into our first republican constitution in the 1970s after independence, and it remains there to this day and it has become something of a political flashpoint from every angle. During the war, for example, it was very common for Buddhist monks to be extremely militant, extremely aggressive, extremely jingoistic in support of the war and in support of that violence.

So, for me, Buddhism has always been inflected by racism, xenophobia, and very literal violence, both politically and literally on street level violence with pogroms and riots and so forth. I think for me the way I write about Buddhism can't help but be inflected by this because this is not just the Buddhism of my lifetime but also the Sri Lankan Buddhism of the last century and more and very much a concern in the present day.

So we also had an election, just this past week, a presidential election. While the nonreligious politics of the candidates can differ—they don't actually differ all that much, but there is some variation—as far as Buddhism goes, Sinhala politics remains exactly where it has been since the

1880s and 1890s, which is to say extremely racialized and extremely entangled, tightly entangled with power.

James Shaheen: You know, I read an essay of yours called "Unbuddhism," and you write about different ways of reckoning with the violence of Sri Lankan Buddhism, which you just referenced, and you say, "Looking for the pure and uncorrupted heart is how hell is made." Could you walk us through that statement?

Vajra Chandrasekera: Yeah. The "Unbuddhism" essay is my first nonfictional attempt to articulate how I think about Buddhism, and this particular dynamic, this search for purity, looking for the pure, uncorrupted heart of things, is a dynamic that I have been seeing my whole life in how Buddhism operates in everyday life in Sri Lanka because, as I said, it's a big part of social and political and cultural life here. But at the same time, there's all this violence going on, so you would think, "Oh, this is not very consistent with what Buddhism claims as Buddhist ethics." And it isn't. And the way in which Sri Lankan Buddhism has managed to make Buddhism into both this prized and valued tier or sphere of moral action or thought, which is clearly out there somewhere, it's out there above us, but we are not actually inhabiting it; we're acting on its behalf. That seems to be the way that this actually works in real life is that everyone, like any monk who is calling for a race riot, for example, will reference the value of Buddhism as a philosophical, moral, and ethical system, will claim that rightness and that value and that power for it, but without ever feeling constrained by those ethics or that philosophy.

The way it's done is either in terms of saying, "Oh, I'm not a very good Buddhist, but I value Buddhism, and therefore I will commit violence to protect it," or, even worse, "I value Buddhism so much that I will taint my own karma to protect Buddhism," which is the kind of thing that people say when they're advocating violence, for example. And by people, I mean monks, I mean politicians, I mean anyone who claims to value this particular kind of Buddhism, which is by far the only mainstream Buddhism that exists in this country.

And that double maneuver of both claiming and identifying a kind of purity which you then do not actually practice or aspire to practice or indeed consider relevant in any way to everyday life or to your actions is, I think, the mechanism through which Buddhism has been rendered both omnipresent and entirely irrelevant.

James Shaheen: When you use the term "unbuddhist," as you say, it implies both a proximity and an opposition. What does it mean then to hold the position of an unbuddhist?

Vajra Chandrasekera: Well, unbuddhist is usually just like an insult. Culturally, it's what someone would say to, well, someone like me, someone saying things like this, to exclude such people from social acceptance, from cultural respectability, to say, "OK, these people are not Buddhists, they don't represent us, they're not part of our culture."

So for me, this was a way of reclaiming that, because, my reasoning was that it's by analogy with atheism, for example. In theistic religions, we have the position, cultural position of the atheist who is someone who rejects the theistic belief system at whatever level but is nevertheless clearly engaged with the theistic belief system, and your whole worldview is built on refuting the theism that you presumably grew up in and are now rejecting. So for me, being unbuddhist is about how it's impossible to get away from the things that you were raised with. You can't just deny that your own upbringing, the cultural reference, the very way that you think about things is formed by your early religious or moral or spiritual teachings, what you absorb from your culture. So taking up a position of opposition within that culture is for me what unbuddhism means. It means being a part of this but in a way that means that I choose to be critical of it because I see a great many problems in the way that it is actually practiced.

James Shaheen: So this violence is a key feature of the novel, and the world of *Rakesfall* is a haunted world, replete with curses, exorcisms, and demon possession. The dead work, go to law

school—there is a dead lawyer, it's very funny—have hobbies, and even go on dating apps. Can you say more about the role of haunting in the novel?

Vajra Chandrasekera: I've always liked haunting as a literary concept because it allows you to have figures haunting your text without necessarily taking it over. This is how I treat it in *Rakesfall*, which is that, for example, many of the ghosts in *Rakesfall* are the ghosts of the war dead, and that war mirrors the Sri Lankan war, and I feel like a great deal of everyday life in Sri Lanka is haunted, whether Sinhalese people would like to admit it or not, by the ghosts of the dead, because that's what happens when a nation state commits genocide in the name of one people, whether those people care to remember this or not, and I think many people would prefer not to remember this or prefer not to think about this.

I feel like you never stop being haunted by these things that happened and by the people who were lost in that way. So for me, haunting is a way to speak of not just the dead but the killed, the murdered, the people who had something taken away from them, who were treated unjustly, and who have not received justice. That is, for me, a very primal and very archetypal image of the haunting, and I think Sri Lanka in particular, and the world as general, is extremely haunted by all the crimes that are and were committed in the names of various people who may or may not endorse those crimes but nevertheless are bound up in them.

James Shaheen: You know, it was humorous at times to see people try to escape the dead or escape those haunting them. There's no shaking them. But the question of haunting is fundamentally also tied to the question of identity and selfhood, I think, as characters navigate experiences of possession. One character "hears her own voice and it is strange and full of strangers, rough and multiple, more teeth than she has in her mouth," and each character carries multiplicities within them, their hauntings but also their past lives. Could you say more about the slipperiness and porousness of the self in the novel?

Vajra Chandrasekera: One of the ways that reincarnation or rebirth, as it is commonly called in Sri Lanka, is formulated or imagined, I think, in very everyday, very commonplace, life, and this is partly because of the last couple of hundred years of colonial influence because it has become very Christian. It actually has been called Protestant Buddhism by various scholars, which is to say there is this idea of a kind of gamified system of moving through levels. You die and then you're reborn somewhere else, and then you die and you're reborn somewhere else. You accumulate points, you lose points based on your actions. If you get more points, you go upwards to heaven; if you lose points, you go down to hell or to animal incarnations or whatever. This is kind of a common folk understanding of reincarnation. And this obviously contradicts some fairly basic Buddhist actual principles, like *anatta*, for example. So I think the way that I like to reconcile those things is to imagine reincarnation as something that is not tied to any person, that could not be tied to any person, because there is really no such thing as a person except in this constellation of biological and psychological elements that we literally are made of. And when we die those things go away. They decompose and are reformulated materially into other things and other people. So reincarnation is literally true in a very basic, very conservation of mass and energy kind of way. But I think culturally also we have something that you could call reincarnation, which is the way we transmit ideas and thoughts and art and everything that we are as people across time through writing. All the various forms of time binding technology that we have invented is about reincarnation in a way because you're making resonant connections with future people.

There's a James Baldwin quote, you're probably familiar with it, where he says something like, "You think that no one in the world has ever felt like you do, you think you're alone in the world, and then you read." To me, that is a big part of what I think of as reincarnation in the sense that while time and history and culture changes dramatically, I think we are all a lot more alike than the cult of individuality would like us to admit, and I think that we find these deep resonances between people through our art, through our social contact with other people. We find these connections, and we find ourselves mirrored in other people. We infect other people with

ourselves. If you make a deep connection with someone, they take away a part of you. Some part of them is now what used to be you, and vice versa, and you can transmit this across history through art and culture. And that is, in fact, how we are made. A little bit of us is everything and everyone that ever wrote something that we read or everyone who wrote a song that we loved or whatever.

So what I wanted to write was a story that could be read as the more literal kind of reincarnation where people are transmitting themselves across time but at the same time could also be read as entirely different people in different eras finding themselves deeply connected through their understanding of history, of the world, the way they approach the world, their politics, what they think is important, what they think is vital, and the relationships, the particular relationships that they build with other people that mirror other such historical relationships that have existed in time.

James Shaheen: You mentioned earlier anatta. Just for our listeners who don't know, that is a Buddhist principle of non-self or no-self, depending on how you look at it, and you've just described how nonetheless, despite the absence of self, we transmit ourselves through time, and it's interesting to me that often we don't even notice that until the person who influenced us is gone. You know, all of a sudden it becomes very apparent, "Oh God, I'm just doing what my dad did," or "I'm just like my dad," and so forth. But one question that recurs is whether characters should be held responsible for their actions in previous lives. So how do you think about this question? Is there sort of a generational guilt, then?

Vajra Chandrasekera: This is a problem that the book poses that it doesn't actively try to answer. At one level it's a meaningless question, because the kind of technology that the book presents, the ability to know things in an absolute sense using this kind of either mystical or technological way of actually seeing the things that happen, we don't have access to that kind of certainty, and without certainty, you can never actually know. But generational guilt, I think, is real because we make it real. And that is not so much a question of guilt for me as recurrence.

We reproduce the sins, if you like, of our ancestors because we are partly calling back to our ancestors, and Sinhala Buddhism is a great example of this. For example, the racism of Sinhala Buddhism in the 19th century was partly driven by older historical, more feudal, more medieval understandings, which were filtered through the colonial era and became racialized, but it was still, nevertheless, people attempting at some level to mimic what they thought their ancestors had done and how they thought their ancestors had behaved, because they were trying to honor this culture that they did not understand, that they could not understand. We don't understand it either, because that kind of pure understanding is what history destroys. But in attempting to honor that history, nevertheless you make yourself part of it. You entangle yourself with it.

So for example, there is a genocide denial in the *Mahavamsa*, which is a Sinhala historical chronicle, an epic text, written in originally beginning in the 5th century. It tells many stories, but it tells a story of a king a few a hundred years before that who committed essentially a war of great many people, and then according to this chronicle, or its modern translations, some Buddhist monks then come and tell this person, the general or king, that it's OK, all the people you killed don't count because there were only two Buddhists who died, and they're the only ones who count. And this is a 5th-century chronicle. Now, this is a 5th-century chronicle as translated by British anthropologists.

I have no idea what to make of it, but this story is a key part of 20th-century Sri Lankan politics, and it is still something that is referenced in modern electoral campaigns today, because King Dutthagamani, the king in question, the one who committed all these murders, he is kind of this great Sinhala heroic figure, and he is also revered as a great Buddhist leader because he built many of the great ancient temples that you can still see some of them to this day in the old cities of Pandharpur, for example, so the violence, the racialization, the us-and-them thinking, this clearly has been around for a long time, and when presidential candidates in the 20th or 21st centuries, as they do, like, reference the story of Dutthagamani today, they are calling upon that history. So I don't know if generational guilt is the word for this, but there is definitely

generational something. There is an inheritance of violence here, specifically Buddhistic or Buddhistically framed violence, which is being called upon and reinforced and recalled and reenacted. And it is in doing those things that generational guilt comes into play, because if you live your life by these rules, then those rules are going to apply back to you.

James Shaheen: Right. So throughout the novel you also experiment with ritual as characters repurpose ancient rites and invent new ones, very creatively I would say. One character resents their own funeral as continuing the "endless epicyclic death rites past and future," while another dances a new ritual of grief into being. So how are you thinking about ritual, particularly rituals of grief?

Vajra Chandrasekera: I grew up absolutely smothered in these because I have a very large family, and Theravada funerals in Sri Lanka involve the ritual that happens at the funeral, then seven days after the funeral, then three months after the funeral, and then every year on the anniversary of the funeral, and then as you accumulate these death dates, each of which requires you to perform certain ritual actions, invite your local village temple monks to come to your house and to give them alms and so forth, there is a whole structure there, and as a family, as you accumulate the dead and more and more of your calendar becomes filled up with these dates, what happens is that generationally people start to fold together the death dates and say, "OK, this one is for my grandfather and all my granduncles" and so on and so forth. So after a few generations of this, what you have is your local monk reciting this long list of the dead, people who died long before you were born, all of whom are part of this ritual structure. So for me, I think my earliest encounters with actual Buddhist cultural practice were through rituals of grief, rituals of mourning, which is why I think they figure so heavily in this book and in other books that I've written as well.

James Shaheen: So in one section of the novel, characters study in the Department of Ritual History, and one has completed a master's degree in the sacred poetry of pre-Kaliyuga civilizations, with an emphasis on "the poetics/politics of deep time, the ritual song cycles that

retell and anchor history, compose causal chains, and sing narrative into being." There's a lot of humor here, too. Could you say more about how rituals retell and anchor history?

Vajra Chandrasekera: Yeah, I think a lot of traditional ritual is about attempting to nail down some part of this very changeable and frightening world and be like, "OK, this part we understand, and this part we're going to keep it happening just like this for as long as humanly possible." Ritual structures also tend to shape a culture's understanding of the world. For example, in a culture that heavily relies on exorcism as a medical intervention, which traditional Sri Lankan folk magic does heavily, there are eighteen devils of disease and they are ascribed various diseases, sometimes new devils are invented as new diseases become common and that sort of thing, and there's a formal ritual structure, dance, music, ritual possession in which the priests essentially have a dialogue with the possessing devil and alternately beseech and bully it into leaving, thereby curing the disease.

So these kinds of things were not uncommon, they were actually very common in the premodern era. They were not all that uncommon even when I was a kid. Now they're relatively more quaint. But I find things like this deeply fascinating because it's so clearly an attempt to marry medicine and science and kind of a natural philosophy of the world to your overarching worldview, the origin story of your people, the mythic terrain of wherever it is that you live.

For example, you will have your local gods, like if you have a forest, then there's probably a God to whom that forest is sacred. If you have a mountain, there's probably a devil up there that the villagers tell you to avoid, and so forth. Or there's a secret treasure hoard that you're not supposed to go looking for because it's protected by some sort of demon.

These are the kinds of things that I think anchor both space and time for people, and we replace them in modernity with whatever their modern equivalents are, but structurally speaking, they don't really change all that much because while modern science and medicine obviously operate in a very different way, most people do not have the formal training to comprehend modern

medical science either. So, to the extent that you're taking whatever authority your society tells you is authoritative, to whatever extent you're taking the authority seriously and carrying out whatever you are told will cure whatever it is that ails you, structurally speaking, we are still very much inhabiting the same kind of world. It's not that it's irrational or rational. In many ways, it's a very rational way to deal with a large and confusing world. You have to be able to trust someone, and you make these decisions as a society about what you consider reliable, authoritative, trustworthy.

So for me, I think I wanted in *Rakesfall* to also, especially in that section, the one that you quoted, to reflect a society that was both very similar to ours in the sense that it clearly has an academy that we would recognize, it has universities and degrees, and you have to write dissertations, and you have advisors, and so on, but at the same time, the model of the world is very different from ours, and partly that's for a reason that happens actually in the text, which is that a certain event happens that changes the nature of physics in that world, and they are now dealing with what they call a regime of poetics that is different from ours. That is, the songs that they sing about their world are different from the stories that we tell about ours, but they are real to those characters in the same way that ours are real to us. We should say they are not irrational because their world actually has been changed to make those things real.

James Shaheen: OK, so you also explore the relationship between history and memory. One character notes that memory is a kind of possession, and others discuss the dangers of sentimentality and holding onto very selective visions of history. So how is memory functioning in the novel, and how is memory a kind of possession? I found that very interesting.

Vajra Chandrasekera: It's similar to what I was saying earlier about how we leave traces of ourselves and other people and vice versa. I think we also find ourselves, you know how you remember things from your own childhood, and for a moment, you are literally that child again, just for a minute, but it's there, or you remember something incredibly embarrassing that you did,

and you very much feel the same cringe response in your body. To me that is possession in the exact sense of the malleability and permeability of the self that I'm talking about.

If there is no fixed self, if there is no ineradicable hard object somewhere inside our selfhood that you can point to and say, "OK, that's me, that's the core of me," if there isn't a core of you and what you are is instead a flow, a set of processes, then being overtaken by a recurring process from your own past is to be possessed by yourself in a way, a different version of yourself, to have that version of yourself come back and inhabit your modern adult body.

You can actually have this response anytime you feel like it when you start to get older, just by looking at your body and realizing that it's getting older, and you have that shock, that, "Oh God, when did I get these wrinkles? When did my hands get so veiny? Why do my knees hurt?" And that voice is the ghost of a younger self.

James Shaheen: I know all about that. At one point, a character's grandmother says that the difference between histories and stories is that stories have endings, and histories understand that nothing ends. So I wonder how you think about your own work in this divide between stories and histories. In some ways, the novel never seems to end, as characters are continually reborn in the same cycles of love, violence, and betrayal.

Vajra Chandrasekera: Yeah. You'll notice at the end, I made it a point not to end the story at a point where that cycle is seen to end in some way. To be clear, the cycle continues, but we are choosing to end at this point. I think in a lot of these reincarnation or recurrence type stories in fiction, because it's the way we are trained to think of narrative, we have been taught, by all the things that we read, to expect narrative resolutions of a particular type: A character must grow in precisely this way; a story has to end at a particular kind of point. So what I've tried to do is recreate that emotional response without necessarily having the narrative say, "OK, the cycle at

kind of transformative, like, grand arc that we are seeing has ended and it's finished and it's done with," because it's not.

James Shaheen: Right. Well, as you say, the novel resists endings, and while it might be described as an apocalyptic novel, it's an apocalypse that keeps happening—the world keeps ending, and people keep finding ways to survive and resist, whether it's living in the city of the dead or regreening a desiccated earth. So how do you think about notions of apocalypse or Kaliyuga?

Vajra Chandrasekera: I mean, obviously, apocalypse is such a huge part of speculative fiction. It's practically a genre in its own right, and it's been done by many great authors. Personally, I like to think of apocalypse as something that happened a long time ago, and we are all living in a postapocalyptic world, whether you like to think of the apocalypse itself as something that happened in the centuries of global carnage and pillage that we now genteelly refer to as the colonial era. For me, that was the world's great apocalypse, and we are all living in its aftermath and picking up the pieces.

So for me, the really important thing is that you have to keep picking up the pieces and that we have to keep picking up each other in this postapocalyptic world because that may be all that you can do. In many situations, you do not have the power to make change at the level that you might wish to, and you should try obviously because at some point, somebody will be able to do that, and maybe it'll be you. But even if you cannot make change at the level that you most deeply desire to, I think it's the effort of doing it anyway is what matters. I don't think the sense of defeat or loss that apocalypse, quote unquote, apocalypse suggests this sense of great loss and defeat and mourning, and while I do think there is an appropriate response to history and the world, I don't think it precludes searching for the revolution in every incarnation that you have.

James Shaheen: OK, I have one more question. You also experiment with notions of audience and viewership, which I found very intriguing, whether it's a TV show's obsessive fandom of

dead children or the American audience of a postmodern play. Yet it's not always clear who's watching whom—as you write in the first chapter, "We watch them; they watch us. The wheel turns." Could you say more about how you play with these questions of audience? The book opens this way, in fact. How do you think about your own audience as a writer?

Vajra Chandrasekera: I think one of the reasons I play with this so much is because it's been so peculiar for me, I think, in particular, because I'm a Sri Lankan author writing in English about Sri Lanka but publishing in the West. So for example, my social media following is about half Sri Lankans and half from everywhere else, and the references, the allusions, the jokes, even the political commentary that I might make will go down very differently in these two audiences. Some things that are completely opaque to one half of that audience are received very differently or enthusiastically by the other one.

I've always had this sense of multiple audiences, of being a part of the audience in a way, because in speculative fiction also very few writers from my part of the world have had any degree of success globally publishing these kinds of novels. So I've always been part of the readership. I grew up reading these kinds of books and finding them alien and kind of fantasy worlds, whether they were set in the modern West or in an actual made-up world. So coming from that perspective of being in the readership and then moving to authorship is another way in which I think I'm obsessed with this dialectic between the viewer and the viewed and the way we keep switching perspectives on this.

I think that it's also an interesting question in narrative because one of the most fascinating things about storytelling is that you often get very interesting answers to who's telling the story and who's hearing the story. To whom is the story being told, and for whom is it being told? Who is overhearing it, even though they weren't supposed to, even if they were not maybe the official audience for this story?

So these are all questions for that, I think, in any text have multiple answers and for me in particular have this particular array of different audiences and different readerships. So I wanted to nod to that, and also, in the text, I wanted to speak to the idea that I tend to write characters who are not at the absolute center of the biggest and most important story in their own story because I find that a little dull, frankly, because, we all know how those stories go, right, when the character has too much main character syndrome. I like to write people who are somewhat on the periphery of whatever is going on in their world because their lives are equally important to them, and that's the part that we are interested in. So. I found interesting also in those kinds of stories to think about who the audience or who is watching people like that in their own setting, so, the fandom of dead children, for example, watching the story, which is set in Sri Lanka of a particular time and place, is the audience of the dead from the war, and that story, that particular part of the story, is set during the war, so it's a particular era of that audience as well.

James Shaheen: So Vajra, is there anything that you'd like to add before I ask you to read something from the book?

Vajra Chandrasekera: Since this is a podcast on the subject of Buddhism, I think I would say, if you're interested in Buddhism, this is definitely a different take on what Buddhism is and what Buddhism can be made into and what it might mean to people in different parts of the world for whom it has a very different set of meanings, historical and cultural meanings. So I think people who are interested in Buddhism or South Asian cultures in general will probably find this book interesting in that sense. They may also find it alienating in that sense. But I hope people give it a shot.

James Shaheen: OK, thank you so much. I'm going to ask you to read from *Rakesfall*, and the particular piece is "The Golden City."

Vajra Chandrasekera: Some spoilers, because this is from the very end of the book.

James Shaheen: But it keeps going, Vajra, it's cyclical.

Vajra Chandrasekera: Yeah, that's true. And of course, it will make no sense whatsoever without the rest of the book, so I think we're quite spoiler-free in that sense.

"The Golden City"

Everybody is happy in the golden city, for a long, long time. Everybody is sad. We have time to be everything in that unspeakable place, before that end at the end of time itself when sacrifice will be called for one last time, when all the worlds collapse into each others' arms, when we will hold ourselves so tight, timeless and alive—our last breath in our lungs, our hands held in the dark, our lips kept warm in the cold—when we find out what lies beyond worlds and time, what crimes are left to commit, what thrones remain to be overthrown.

But we're not there yet. In the golden city, the long, blessed future stretches out ahead. Most of our worlds were yet to come. It was fine. It was life. We don't have to talk about it.

James Shaheen: Vajra Chandrasekera, thanks so much for joining us. It's been a great pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Rakesfall*, available now.

Vajra Chandrasekera: Thank you so much for having me.

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