

mahogany



Issue 1 : The +65 South Asian

Edited by Prasanthi Ram & Jaryl George Solomon



Mahogany Journal

Issue 1: The +65 South Asian, June 2020

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Editor's Note (Poetry)

Jaryl George Solomon

“The Human Coconut”

Throughout my young adult years, it was not alien for me to be labelled as a coconut (and in some problematic cases, an Oreo too). My Indianness tends to be symbolically reduced to a game of tug-of-war that I had never asked to participate in. Somehow, I had to balance between being the colour of a fuzzy husk with my supposed ‘whiteness’ that came from a media diet of ‘90s cartoons and horror films. It did not help that my mother gifted me a three-tiered ‘ang moh’ name due to my Roman Catholic roots and that I found myself at the back of every Malay class struggling to comprehend what was being said. I was truly a conundrum personified!

Even presently, I still seem to confuse many. My students have questioned if I hailed from Wakanda and taxi drivers have admonished me for not knowing Tamil. I usually freeze if anyone interrogates me about my heritage. It has been 32 years of being a Singaporean Indian and I still find myself uncomfortable in my brownness from time to time. Oddly, this was exactly why I decided to embark on this journey to birth Mahogany Journal alongside my dear friend, Prasanthi. I was sure about many other +65 South Asians similarly struggling with the questions, assumptions and interpretations that came with the colour of our skin. At the same time, I hoped that I would come across +65 South Asian writers who would be so unabashedly themselves that I could not help but seek comfort in their light. Ultimately, we needed a platform to anchor these voices in, voices that may otherwise be drowned out or overlooked. With the launch of our inaugural issue, both Prasanthi and I hope that we have accomplished this.

Thankfully, the many submissions we received explored the intricacies of being South Asian in Singapore. While we encountered some submissions that unfortunately did not know what +65 South Asian voices referred to, the bulk of the poetry and prose received handled our open call rather well. Most of the submissions, especially the poetry, have helped me understand that there is a paradox that comes with discussing our experiences as marginalised voices. Readers constantly

expect us to unearth the daily cruelties that can come with being South Asian for all to gawk at. Yet, at the same time, are we doing a disservice to our community if we blatantly choose to reject writing just that? Do we become any lesser of a South Asian if we happen to date someone not belonging to our racial group or if we were to pick ziplocked sandwiches over tiffins? And what happens if we decide to choose our battles with discrimination?

I hope that the thirteen pieces selected by us offer some form of clarity to these questions posed. However, even if they do not, that is perfectly alright too. I do acknowledge that the pieces we have selected are but a sliver of what the +65 South Asian community can offer in its entirety. What I do wish is for all our readers to genuinely see and receive Mahogany for what it is and can become, not for what it is not. I am confident that as our journal grows through future open calls, we will hone the voices we have heard and be exposed to even more insights that would help us appreciate the many facets of being South Asian in Singapore. After all, Mahogany Journal will always be a platform created by +65 South Asians for +65 South Asians.

At the end of the day, as I binge on more dog rescue videos on YouTube to buy time as we inch towards a new normal amidst the global pandemic, I must confront the many labels plastered upon me. I am (often) a coconut, (sometimes) an Oreo and even, (falsely) a king cum superhero of a fictional land named Wakanda. More importantly, I am the poetry editor of a journal I am very proud to have brought to fruition with my close friend who has embraced me in all of my confusing South Asianness. May this journal do the same for you.

With gratitude and hope,

Jaryl

Editor's Note (Fiction)

Prasanthi Ram

"Stories for Shaken Spirits"

When Jaryl and I first conceptualised Mahogany Journal back in December, we had no idea that in just a few months, the entire world would be forced to its knees as an invisible disease ravaged through terrified masses. The very premise would have sounded to us like a wild fever dream. But here we are in the month of June, 2020, still with no end in sight and I must admit—the future seems awfully bleak. The pandemic has exacerbated every governmental vulnerability and socioeconomic disparity possible, and one wonders what may be the final straw that sends our global society crashing to a point of no-return. The cynics among us may even say that we are already there.

What then does it mean to build this journal, this online literary space for +65 South Asians? How do we rationalise this project that does not address the immediate crisis we are gravely circumscribed by? Have these perennial concerns about our identity, community and the treatment of both become irrelevant for the time being in the face of disease?

At first, I too had no reasonable answers to these questions. I was weary and anxious from the daily updates of surging death counts and ever-expanding restrictions. And with a surplus of time on my hands, I was afraid that I could not be productive enough, or that even my productivity would amount to nothing in the grand scheme of life post-pandemic.

But you see, that is the magical thing about art. The sheer endeavour of building a virtual community of stories while isolated and on the perpetual brink of cabin fever has slowly revealed itself as an incandescent gift to my spirit. Truly, I have found that it is easy to forget what it means to be a social being in a world of lockdowns and circuit breakers. It is easy to forget how much and how easily we gain just by communicating with another person. But through the words of our contributors, I now remember what it means to resonate with someone else, that too with fellow

South Asian writers, and find comfort in that intangible connection. This is precisely what makes art so meaningful; it is the salve to our shaken spirits and it should never be taken for granted.

The five short stories we have selected for this first issue each contain their own salves that are delivered to us through an eclectic yet familiar bevy of characters. How there is still immense joy to be gained from our choices even if no one else approves in "Rahemat's Wish". How our mothers protect us and teach us to protect ourselves in "Unsaid Things". How it is not okay to beat ourselves up for not fitting into society's expectations of our bodies in "Sacred Scalp" as well as "Cold in Here". How religion can eternally stand between a parent and child and yet be the final thread that holds them together in "The Prayer Mat". These pieces, together with the eight poems we have chosen, are very much about us—the +65 South Asian community that is so heterogeneous and layered that it spills generously out of the box it is often forced into. But the works are universal too, as art often is, in their messages about life and living.

From an idea shared between two old friends to a functional website to forty-four submissions and finally, thirteen solid works, both Jaryl and I have been truly blessed by your interest in and support of our project. It would be an understatement to say that I am proud of our first issue. I am absolutely over the moon at the thought of introducing you to these writers from and works about our community. To our contributors, it is because of you that I can now call myself an editor—for that, I am infinitely grateful. To Jaryl, just look how far our pipe dream has come, from fretting over colour palettes and domain names in an air-conditioned corner of Coffeesmith to this textual manifestation of our community's desire to be seen, heard and read. And lastly to our readers, it is my sincerest wish that every issue of Mahogany Journal henceforth brings us all a step closer to understanding the enigmatic essence of living as a +65 South Asian.

Sending love and light,

Prasanthi

Apu Neh Neh Adolescence

Vaishnavi Pumynathan

At 8, the form teacher tells my mother that my greasy hair discomforts the other students.
Is this why I apply coconut oil to my hair only on Saturdays?

At 10, my classmates shake their heads and imitate my teacher mispronouncing my name.
Is this why I hesitate to raise my hand in class?

At 12, the neighbourhood children are told the apu neh neh will catch them if they stay out late.
Is this why they run when my father comes to take me home?

At 14, my mother advises me to avoid the sun in case my inferior skin gets darker.
Is this why I stop swimming and netball practice?

At 16, a boy in Math tuition asks why I have so much hair on my face and body.
Is this why I wear long-sleeved shirts and pants?

At 18, my colleague teases about my silver tiffin carrier that is always filled with curd rice.
Is this why I tell my grandmother I prefer sandwiches in a ziplock bag?

At 20, I am stripped, polished and mannered for university with an accent that is hard to place.
Is this when I am finally accused of not being Indian enough?

Rahemat's Wish

Fazila Banu

“Singapoor?!” Ibrahim sprayed out his evening tea in disbelief.

The milk tea dripped down his long white beard, staining his singlet. Hastily wiping his beard dry, Ibrahim stilled the wooden swing he was seated on and spoke with fury, “Don’t even think about going to Singapoor. I swear upon Allah, your children will grow to neglect you. You will be left to survive alone without any help just like Aasamah.”

He paused to mute the TV programme that was mourning the death of Prime Minister M.G. Ramachandran, then continued, “She defied her parents and chose to go to Singapore with her husband, leaving them behind in Nagapattinam. Her only son married a Chinese woman there and the rest is history!”

Rahemat looked at her younger son Harun, who was busy squeezing his tiny pet bunny that certainly looked traumatised. Would he marry a Chinese girl in the future? *Even if he were to marry a Chinese girl, why would he leave me if I teach him to love me first?* Rahemat’s mind raced to rationalise.

“My husband will take good care of me and the children, God willing. Don’t worry, Attha.”

“With your husband’s salary, I shall see how you will survive! I know how hard it is over there. You will be back in a year’s time!” Ibrahim faked a chuckle and sipped the remaining tea from his cup.

“Your betel nut leaves,” said Rahemat’s mother, placing a platter gently on the wooden swing.

“Where is the new sunnambu? This looks as dry as your grandmother’s paste tub,” snapped Ibrahim as he pushed the platter away in irritation.

Both Rahemat and Jamilah stared at the platter. The platter contained fresh betel nut leaves, spreadable slaked lime paste and crisp-looking shreds of areca nut, all waiting to be devoured.

Rahemat knew well enough what her father expected. It was not the dry-looking slaked lime paste but her rebellion against his word that agitated him. *Your docile daughter has grown a backbone to counter your argument, Attha,* Rahemat thought. He had forgotten that his boundaries and temperaments no longer scared her.

Rahemat tried to make eye contact with her mother. But Jamilah cleared her throat and spoke softly, “We knew that our son-in-law would eventually invite her and the two children to Singapore. Remember he told us once that if Rahemat wishes, he will make it happen. Maybe Rahemat should try living there for some time. If she doesn’t like it, she can always come back.”

Ignoring Jamilah, Ibrahim stood up from the swing, threw the cup and saucer onto the betel nut leaves platter and walked away. Rahemat watched the little cup land directly onto the slaked lime paste.

“Amma, just because most husbands worked abroad, Attha included, does not mean that my life has to be the same. This is my wish—to go to Singapore and join my husband. Isn’t that why you adamantly married me off to a Singapore Citizenship holder? So that I can move there for a better life?” Rahemat lamented.

As Jamilah picked up the messy platter, she quietly comforted her only daughter. “Of course, sweetie. I don’t want you to suffer the way I and generations of women before me did. I lived half of my life running this household all by myself with the money your father sent me from his food stall in Singapore. Although I’m used to him visiting us once or twice a year, I don’t want that to happen to my daughter as well. I want to see you bloom in marital bliss. He’s just biased against the liberal lifestyle there.”

Feeling a lump in her throat, Rahemat embraced her mother as tightly as she could.

*

“Amma! Is that Daddy?!”

Little Harun pulled the pallu of Rahemat's green saree to gain her attention as she anxiously looked out for their luggage on the fast-moving conveyor belt. It was confusing since every black luggage looked the same; the yellow ribbon that she had tied for identification could barely be seen from afar. Almost everyone on their SQ1001 flight from Chennai to Singapore Changi Airport had already received their luggage and was heading out of the arrival hall. Harun’s eagerness to see his father was not helping the situation either as it was tiring Rahemat further.

Holding onto her other hand was Fatimah, her five-year-old daughter, obedient and wary of the unfamiliar surroundings. The night before, she had asked Rahemat where they were heading with the large luggage and cardboard boxes filled with bottled Masala powders.

“Amma! The yellow ribbon!” Fatimah alerted her mother.

Grateful for Fatimah’s eagle eyes, Rahemat loaded the final luggage on top of the cardboard boxes already on the trolley and pushed it out with her children in tow.

“Amma! This man is wearing square spectacles. Is this Daddy?” Harun pointed at the twentieth daddy-look-alike as he ran alongside his mother and sister.

Nizam was indeed behind the metal railing, in his huge silver-rimmed spectacles, waiting to embrace them. Eyeing her husband, she leaned down to Harun and whispered in his ears that his Daddy was standing right in front of them. The boy rubbed his eyes and scanned the several men behind the metal railing. One bald man with a fair complexion was speaking in a foreign language. Standing next to him was another man, short and stout with huge curly hair. Harun's eyes moved to the bespectacled man on the right with a plastic packet of a strange black liquid in his left hand. Rahemat sensed that her son was very confused for he had only seen his father as a bespectacled clean-shaven man in photographs.

“As-salamu-alaykum! How was the journey, sweetheart?” Nizam greeted Rahemat. He smelled of coffee, though the smell was different from the usual filter coffee they made at home.

“Tiring but I am glad we landed safely,” Rahemat heaved a sigh of relief and kissed his right hand.

Taking hold of his wife’s hand, Nizam then turned his attention to Fatimah, who was smiling widely, eager to be carried by her father. In between them squeezed Harun, whose large eyes peered up at Nizam. Rahemat realised that his shirt was misbuttoned, with stains of chocolate ice cream framing the corners of his pocket; she had forgotten to clean Harun before disembarking from the flight.

Pulling her away from her self-conscious thoughts, Nizam exclaimed, “The last I saw this little one was during his naming ceremony three years ago, wasn’t it?” He scooped both Harun and Fatimah up into his arms.

Harun let out a squeak. “Amma! Is this Daddy?”

Fatimah giggled and replied instead, “Aamaa chellam! This is Daddy!”

*

It was a quarter to six in the evening. Harun and Fatimah were napping soundly. Rahemat walked into the tiny service balcony. Long bamboo poles of different colours were neatly stacked against the laundry basket. Nizam had warned her not to touch the poles while he was away. It was a precarious chore that she would eventually have to master when hanging out the clothes here; one apparently had to insert the heavy poles carrying clothes into the holders outside the service balcony. As Rahemat looked out the window, she spotted little children at the playground below, screaming away while playing. Some were even digging the sand with old 7-up plastic bottles. Soon, her Harun and Fatimah would join those children too.

Leaning against the window ledge, Rahemat then turned around to examine her new kitchen. It was strange. The box-like kitchen was just a foot away from the bedroom and a distance away from the living room. Despite her qualms about the flat's size, Rahemat was comforted by the fact that she could keep an eye on Harun and Fatimah without being paranoid about their whereabouts. She could cook without constantly yelling out their names as she did back home, in their three-storeyed bungalow that had plenty of space for the children to disappear during playtime. Besides, for a rent of eighty-five Singapore dollars, she knew that they would not get any flat larger than this anyway as she had heard from Nizam about the high rental rates on the island.

Rahemat observed the small frying pan hanging above the stove, the squeaky-clean basin and then, a tall familiar tin of Ayam sardines. Growing up, Rahemat had enjoyed the canned sardines cooked to perfection by her Amma who had learnt it from Attha. After all, he had worked in Malaysia for fifteen years, learning to make Malaysian street staples such as mee goreng, nasi goreng and sardine dishes, before setting up a prata stall in Singapore. He co-owned that stall with Amma's cousin brother and they took turns to manage it every six months. Rahemat knew that it was at some place called Tanjong Pagar Food Centre. She wondered if it was sardines that Nizam wanted for dinner later; he had not mentioned any dinner plans before leaving for work.

Jolting her out of her thoughts then was Nizam's cheerful "As-salamu-alaykum!" from outside. Tucking her blue paisley printed soft chiffon pallu into her saree's waistline, Rahemat rushed out to her husband.

At the gate stood Harun with his napkin half undone, exposing his left butt cheek. "Is this Daddy?" he probed Rahemat once again.

Smiling at him, she gave a slight nod as she carried him into her arms and unlocked the gate.

"I bought chicken murtabak and mee soto for us," said Nizam, kissing Harun on his forehead on his way into the flat. "Dear, lay out some newspaper please."

Balancing Harun on her hip, Rahemat gently placed some newspaper sheets on the floor as Nizam gathered the cutlery from the kitchen.

"Amma, pasikuthu." A hungry Fatimah rubbed her eyes and mumbled inaudibly as she walked out into the living room where dinner was being laid out.

Motioning for Fatimah to sit next to her, Rahemat watched her husband in action. Nizam unpacked the strips of chicken murtabak onto a red plastic plate, then poured the contents of the mee soto packet into a big glass bowl. There was a large piece of chicken breast tangled in yellow noodles, and on top of it was a crispy palm-sized brown cutlet. Rahemat had never seen this dish before.

"Try it dear. It is a famous Malay dish. Your father should know it very well. The broth and the spicy chili sambal go well together! I love the begedil especially," grinned Nizam, pointing to the brown cutlet.

"Attha has never cooked this for me—we hardly have noodles with soup in our food. I've only had mee goreng before," Rahemat replied, reaching out for a piece for herself.

"It's okay ma. You will discover more dishes once you start going out here. Speaking of which, last night you said that you wanted to get some fish. I will bring you to the local market at Jalan Membina tomorrow morning. They sell fresh fish like white pomfret and anchovies. You will absolutely love it. You have to try kopi-o too, seriya? It tastes even better than our karupati coffee."

Rahemat nodded at her husband eagerly. As she munched on the thick potato cutlet, she marvelled at the sight before her: her first proper meal with her family. One that was foreign yet

comforting at the same time, with her husband and children all to herself in their little space in Singapore.

As if reading her mind, Nizam touched Rahemat's left hand that was wrapped tightly around Harun's waist and whispered into Rahemat's ears, "I feel blessed to have you and the children here with me."

Wiping her mouth, she said, "I always wanted us to be together. Watching my parents live in two different countries and only seeing each other occasionally was not something I wanted for myself. I wanted us to give the best for ourselves and our children. That's why I am here now. This is the beginning,"

"Yes, our beginning," Nizam affirmed her statement, kissing her hand.

"Eee, mutham!" squealed Fatimah, having run out of patience while waiting for her mother to put another piece of begedil into her mouth.

Nizam and Rahemat burst out laughing. Little Harun too joined in the chorus, not knowing what the laughter was for. There they were as a family, home at last.

Being Just Brown

Sanusha S Sritharan

I know what I'm supposed to write about:
my name splintering on your tongue,
your backhanded compliments about my appearance,
and the inevitable "Where are you *really* from?" question.
But, is it okay if my work is not peppered with mentions of dhal¹,
or wrapped up in sarees²,
or even dotted with pottus³?

You say you want to see the authentic me,
the brown girl growing up in Singapore me;
but I didn't think of myself as brown,
until you told me I should.
(More accurately, you labelled me black
because there's only one brown crayon in the box
that you're using to colour in the Malay boy.)

I'm told to write from my own experience, to #represent,
to educate you about curry and coconut oil and curly unruly hair.
But I want to write of journeys taken and those yet to come.
About broken hearts and unrequited love. Of freefalls
through the icy depths of depression, praying they are but sojourns.
And the yearnings of a soul moored to concrete, a wanderlust
too big for this island that I once remarked was smaller
than my five-year-old thumb on a world map.

Do you think you will ever see past the hue of my skin?
After all, I can't change it. (And no, I do *not* use whitening creams.)
Yet, what happens when my subversion only strengthens your chokeholds?
There is no room for all my shades of complexity, it seems,
especially not through your coloured vision.
Tell me, how do I leave all of this?
I'm tired of being just brown.

¹ Do you mind looking it up yourself?

² I feel like I'm hosting a never-ending AMA session.

³ No seriously, just Google it.

I am my own kind

Rohini Anant

Amma's *roti* beats *prata* any day
and, can *kopi c* ever match *filter kaapi*?
Words like *gobi* and *chaat* confuse
those who only know of *rojak* and *bubble tea*
at the hawker centre where I can never
satisfy my craving for home.

But I should use another term
to describe the place where
the eyes follow me endlessly.
There's no need to code-switch here.
It's in my demeanour, the way I carry myself:
meek and awkward,
waiting to be chauffeured
on the streets I've never known.
She can't be from here, they must think.
To be Indian takes a different kind of skill to navigate.

Alas, in Singapore, I've been questioned too,
"What *kind* of Indian are you?"
Well, I've never had a meal at *Tekka* market
and don't care if it's *Deepavali* or *Divali*.
At home, I speak Tamil, Malayalam, and Hindi.
It's hard to fully capture me with labels
when I'll always mark out my own lines.

Just know that I am an Indian. My very own kind.

Unsaid Things

Yvonne Arivalagan

I did not think there was any reason to be afraid that night.

Smoke curled from the ashtray on the bin. Tiny insects' corpses were visible inside the fluorescent tube. Cars sped past, a little faster, a little more reckless in the dark. And I was with my mother.

There was a safety that came with being with my mother. Safety in the knowledge that she would know what to do, in case something were to happen (because things can happen, even in Singapore). That knowledge, of course, lived among the Unsaid Things. There were many Unsaid Things between Indian mothers and their daughters. Together, they formed a rich tapestry of arched eyebrows and curled lips, and on nights like this, sidelong glances and the silent promise of company.

"No need to wait with me," I muttered as my mother sat beside me on the hard orange seat of the bus stop, the Unsaid Things swelling between us like a balloon. "What if you miss your train?" My dorm at the university was close by, but it would be a pricey cab ride home for my mother.

"No-no, it's okay," she replied. "Last train is only at eleven-thirty."

In other words, *I am never leaving you alone at night, no matter how old you are.*

"Okay, thanks."

"Your bus should be coming soon, right?"

"Yup."

"So," she started. "As I was saying about your aunty, I keep telling her to stop forgiving that man. He'll say sorry, come begging at her feet, and she'll melt and take him back. Then a few months later, he'll be back to his usual... you know. Kalataa," she added darkly.

"Hm," I grunted. Now there was a Tamil word that painted a thousand pictures. *Mischief*. Amazing how many euphemisms existed in the Indian woman's lexicon for 'philanderer'.

"She's too soft. That's why he keeps taking advantage of her. I told her so—I'm not scared, you know—but she got angry at me. Can you believe that?"

"Hm."

“If I were her, I would have packed my things, taken the kids and left him long ago!”

I tried hard not to roll my eyes. *Where was the damn bus?* A pair of headlights flashed in the distance and I squinted hopefully, but it was just another car.

“You know she told me once that I shouldn’t get so mad at your father for drinking, that I should be more, what’s the word? Compassionate. Because apparently, he’s ‘going through a tough time.’ So? What about me? I’m not going through a tough time?”

The car stopped about twenty metres ahead of the bus-stop, the loud rumble of its engine muffling my mother’s voice. I checked my watch. The bus should have been here by now.

“She called me a cold woman,” my mother continued louder now, above the noise of the engine. “Did you know that? Daring to stand up to my husband makes me cold? Well, just look at me. I’ve raised two successful children. I’m still holding on to my job. And look at her, stuck with that disgusting husband of hers for the rest of her life.”

I wished she would not speak so callously, least of all about an aunt whom I loved. My aunt was perhaps too forgiving, but she also loved fiercely and without reserve. Still, I knew better than to argue with my mother.

The car’s engine revved obnoxiously a few times. Its passenger doors swung open and three men climbed out. Loud music thumped from inside as they stood around the car, talking and laughing noisily. One of them peered over his shoulder and glanced at us.

A bolt of panic shot up my body. Next to me, I felt my mother’s shoulders briefly tense. I was reminded of an unwelcome memory. I had been walking home alone after a night out with friends. A group of men were gathered around the only path I had to my block. I looked down, making myself as small as possible in the futile hope that they would not notice me. As I passed them, one of them wolf-whistled and told me how beautiful I was. I could still remember the high, discordant sound of the whistle as it pierced my ears.

“Anyway,” my mother said, her words strung a little tighter together this time. “Sorry to say those things about your aunty. It sounds harsh, I know, but I have to be honest.”

“I know,” I said, only half-listening now.

Another memory forced its way to the top of my mind. Of a lecherous voice echoing across a carpark and between towering HDB blocks, disembodied and invisible behind hundreds of darkened windows.

“I hope you don’t think I’m being mean,” my mother said. “Sometimes it’s not good to be too soft, you understand? Otherwise people will take advantage of you.”

Men will be men’ is such bullshit, my best friend’s spirited voice joined the throng of memories in my head. *We shouldn’t have to just ignore them. Why should women have to do the work of self-regulation and self-defense, and men not a damn thing?*

The men started walking toward us. They were still talking, still laughing, their heads thrown back and their arms slack and swinging by their sides. Dread crept into my stomach and I eyed my T-shirt to ensure it was not too taut or too loose anywhere. My mother straightened in her seat. She had grown rigid, and I knew she was watching the men from the corner of her eye.

As they neared us, the men stopped talking. Instead of relief, this new and sudden absence of noise felt as sharp as a strangled breath. I could tell they were trying to avert their eyes, as though my mother and I were a pair of suns that could burn them if they stared too closely. Their actions felt all wrong to me, like I was the one holding on to something that could destroy them if they made the slightest misstep. But just one of them—the same one who had sneaked a glance at us earlier—turned his head toward us again as he passed by. I felt his eyes linger on my body and my skin crawled.

Without thinking, I looked down.

“Hold your head up,” my mother commanded and there was iron in her voice. “Don’t show them you’re afraid.”

The man’s head whipped forward like he had been slapped. Not one of them uttered a word until they were a good distance away.

And just like that, an Unsaid Thing squeezed from its confines and lay unfurled at our feet. It was a rare, beautiful thing and I sat arrested in its presence until it disappeared.

It occurred to me then, just how much the core of my relationship with my mother was composed of Unsaid Things. Just how much was contained in our euphemisms, the margins of our

sentences, the tense lines of our shoulders, as much as our silences. A familiar trundling sound signalled the arrival of the last bus.

“Message me when you reach home,” my mother said, pressing a small kiss to my cheek.

I leaned into her arms for a brief hug. “I will.”

The bus screeched to a halt in front of us and its doors clattered open. I boarded and found a seat by a window. As the bus began to move, I turned and waved at my mother. She slipped in and out of view through the panelled windows and finally, out of sight.

Then, I held my head a little higher.

When I reply him,
I remember the foreign flags coming down.
I tell him, “I come from women
who started revolutions.”
and that

I am a revolution
waiting
to begin.

Sacred Scalp

Anittha Thanabalan

The restaurant is unreasonably cold. Hiding under today's red and yellow head wrap, my scalp shudders from the chill. The frosted windows make the outside world seem fuzzy. Across from me, a young cousin toys with her hair. Hair the exact shade as the small black pottu sitting proudly between her brows. I watch as her fingers glide through her long shiny hair effortlessly, not once separating a strand from her gloriously healthy head.

Aatha sits next to her, sniffing a spoonful of chicken masala tentatively before giving it a stately nod of approval. Delicately, she moves a loosened lock of deep grey hair from her wrinkled lips before taking a hesitant bite. It has come loose from the large bun that she always wears when out. Unlike some of the old women who pin extra pieces of different coloured hair to their heads, hers is a hundred percent home-grown.

Aatha adjusts her sari, careful to keep it out of her food. Smiling at me, she asks in Tamil, "Do you like it?"

I do not have to answer. A volley of voices rises to offer their opinions. Aatha's large bun turns with her as she looks to the other end of the long table where the rest of the women in my family sit.

Head after head is filled with voluminous dark or dyed hair. Bouncy bobs, perfectly curled tresses and silky ponytails that shimmer even in the dim light of the restaurant. A table full of women who share my blood and ancestry, but not my hair.

Most of them have already walked the path I am due to navigate in two weeks. I was inundated with countless scraps of contradictory advice as soon as the nuptials were announced. My handphone has become an encyclopaedia for Indian weddings. Look under Nalini Periamma to find minute explanations of which deco companies should be avoided. Or under Maina Sithi to read what can only be described as an academic research paper on the number and contents of silver trays that should be present on stage. If not, Ambika Akka, if what is desired is an exhaustive list of traditional beauty treatments that will guarantee a glowing bride.

I had accepted their advice with a smile and thanks. It seemed like a simple way to keep them happy—a happiness that was sure to be exterminated when they discovered the secret beneath my head wrap.

Because my fingers can no longer plait or twist my hair, I have learned to knot the squares of cloth into intricate styles.. Through trial and error, the bow style has proven the most effective at diverting attention. People are so tickled by the giant bow sitting atop my head that they don't ask about the constant head hiding. There are head wraps for every occasion, all thoughtfully picked out to give my scalp a carefully curated liveliness. Sometimes, I am even able to forget what is happening beneath my giant bow. But then an errant hand strokes the head wrap and my heart jerks into stillness. It reminds me how I am always terrified that it will come undone and reveal how I too, have come undone.

Neither dermatologist offices nor hair tonics had stopped the spreading of bare scalp. I had doused my head with minoxidil religiously. Formed a spiritual practice of scrunching coconut and castor oil into it. Worn silk bonnets to sleep. Refrained from using heat and tight styles. Learned how to do a headstand so that all the blood would rush to my head for three-minutes a day. Became an expert in reading product labels. Knew the differences between virgin, extra-virgin and cold-pressed oils. Could rank the effectiveness of different combs in the market based on hair type and curl pattern—another encyclopaedia, this one stored in my head, but completely useless to me.

My hair is now most visible on the bathroom floor. Dislodged, they drift towards the mini whirlpool of the drain. Their limp bodies layer one atop the other, perhaps in an effort to save each other from being further exiled. Then the drain clogs and the shower begins to fill with water, spilling over the edge of the shower floor and flooding the sink and toilet area. A death force has taken over the top of my head. The thin black squatters are heartlessly tossed out. A final few stragglers huddle together. Desperately, they try to help each other dig deeper into the arid earth of my scalp. But I know they will not survive the next shampooing. In the fogged mirror, I pretend I am who I used to be. But with a dispirited swipe of my hand, the truth reveals itself, undeniable and unstoppable.

Down the middle of my head, where my hair used to thrive, there is now only a dried river of smooth skin. A parting to rival the Red Sea's. No pores, no fine little baby hairs. It is as if the follicles have sensed danger and abandoned ship. The idea of an Indian bride commands images of beautiful saris and women adorned with gold. Their toes are ringed with silver and their eyes are lined with kohl. Their arms and legs are tattooed in intricately detailed henna. But most importantly, an Indian bride is marked by her hair, separating her immediately from every other woman present. It is her crowning glory, an exaltation to her beauty. A head of black silk festooned with a veritable garden of flowers, commanding every wet eye in the room. Granted, over time, the styles have changed. Plaits swapped for planet-sized buns, waist-length locks snipped short.

But the hair is always there.

The Indian bride is draped in millenniums of customs and practices. The walk from her dressing room to the sacred fire is an ode to every woman who has come before her, reverently tracing their steps. The path has been worn smooth and she knows, without needing to look, exactly where to go.

I am no Proper Indian Bride.

“Come, come. Hairstylist is next. We don't want to be late,” Aatha says.

A murmuring of agreement sweeps across the table. I follow my family out into the bald heat of Tekka, shocking my skin after the frigid climate of the restaurant. The group comes to a screeching halt outside a shop offering threading services. I decline to enter, choosing time with my thoughts as I wander down the street. There is no safe bridal path for me. I will not walk into that wedding hall or the next chapter of my life, safe in my cocoon of womanhood. What will my misstep cost? What does it mean to encounter a pothole that I've never seen addressed before? Will those meticulously managed trails that diverge into motherhood and matriarchy still be accessible to me? Or am I doomed to traverse wild country lanes?

I pause at a colourful Indian temple, looking at the figures carved into the pagoda. Every figure—dancing, seated, fighting, worshipping—sports a full head of hair. Even the bare-bodied

priests within have neatly combed mini-buns, passing on the offerings of worshippers to deities with glimmering gold crowns balanced on long thick manes.

Hair is *the* thing. The centre of power. A boundless river from which an Indian woman draws her infinite strength. It speaks of culture, customs and character. A link to our spiritual selves and the most obvious connection to the Gods I had been taught to worship in my childhood. It is the first thing we sacrifice to the same Gods when we desperately want a prayer or wish to come true.

Not having enough hair to sacrifice for more hair seems like a cruel joke.

From a little store nearby, the familiar scent of coconut oil mixed in with the thumping music of Tamil pop songs assault my senses. The blue bottles, arranged neatly according to size, seem to mock me. Somehow the secret cocktail of oils that wove magic and mysticism into the roots of every other female around me has not worked. Does that make me less Indian than them? Is this punishment for eating meat on religious occasions and using my period as an excuse to skip every temple event?

My family has caught up, neat eyebrows in tow. Before long, I am stuffed into a comfortable squashy chair at a plush salon. The familiar scent of hair care chemicals and the sight of scissors, hair dryers and combs activates my sweat glands, gradually darkening the light grey of my hoodie. My relatives are fanning themselves on couches, calling out for water. Some are flipping through magazines and asking about prices.

A lady with a sheet of deep red rebonded hair hanging down to her waist identifies herself as the salon owner. “So, dear, big day coming ah,” she smiles conspiratorially, as if the wedding was the secret in the room.

“What styles have you been thinking of?” The terrifying question is accompanied with a motherly smile. I stare at her blankly. She asks me again but still, I stay silent. Somewhere between losing my hair and my Indian-ness, I seem to have lost my voice.

“Harini. Answer her.”

“What do you want?”

“Say!”

I can only shrug my shoulders.

The salon owner waves away my family’s comments. “It can be overwhelming, making so many decisions, you know. Let’s see, ah?”

Her perfectly manicured fingers undo the knots of my head wrap. She pulls it slowly off my head, freeing the paper-thin curls. The front of the head wrap slides up from my forehead. The veil lifts, revealing a finger length of white scalp down the middle of my crown.

There is a deep silence. Hands are covering mouths. Mine rest limply on my knees.

My eyes blur with tears and a fluttering of aunts, cousins, mother and grandmother descend upon me. They stroke my hair and scalp, and cramp tissues into my hand. Someone clucks their tongue sympathetically and saris, shawls and stylish tops cover my face as I am hugged repeatedly.

Mental files on haircare trade secrets, musty with age, are opened and discussed. The salon is soon overrun by a raucous debate that blooms over which oils will promote growth. Eyes are rolled, and hands are placed agitatedly on hips. I know my phone will swell with advice and instruction before the day is even up. I take a deep cleansing breath and close my eyes, feeling the lush cocoon of Indian womanhood alive around me.

Even If I Have the Money

Kaamela Barvin

Can I be friends with my hairs?
I'm tired of treating them like terrors.
Ripping, shaving, waxing, threading,
(aaah aaah owwwwww)
that's 100 dollars every month just to feel like a woman!
"Think she follows her dad lah, so hairy."
All the aunties think it's funny.
They tell me sideburns are fine
but insinuate that I look like a man.

I started with Veet and ended with razors.
Epilators were the rave for a while
but man, did that hurt. These hairs,
they return every time, sharp then clawing.
Again, and again. New products, more money.
It's a constant cycle of alternatives and
a one-way cash flow.

This is my thousandth time meeting the aunty at the parlour.
I'm still getting scolded for shaving.
"Ingrown hairs," she laments.
"Your hair very thick, wax every month.
Then only slowly slowly hair will stop."
Okay, yes aunty, I'm sorry.
But how can a student afford 100 dollars just to feel...

Clean

Even that is problematic -
enough of untangling this mishmash of what I want, what he wants, what society wants.
Maybe, I want my vagina bald.
Maybe, he wants it too.
Maybe, society makes me think I want my vagina bald.
So what? I feel so smooth!
Is this not the joy of personal choice?
That little voice that sings,
"You're prettier when your hair is gone!"

Is that not the freedom song?
Or is it capitalism, sexism, racism?
Take out the jargon and I'll say it as it is.
Money is the evil that makes me feel so good.
It sweeps that tangled mess straight out of my room,
carries me along like a floating showtune.
So, I guess Visa, Nets, Paylah!
Just get this hair off me,
please.

Cold in Here

Shreya Acharya

It always comes up as bile that fights its way rebelliously upwards through my throat. Everyone knows, but no one asks why I do not eat in the canteen or go for dinner parties. I disappear for months at a time, like a bear ready for winter, except while its belly is swollen with a hearty supply of sustenance, mine growls, as if the bear itself has taken shelter in my stomach, unprepared for hibernation.

My diet is limited to the cupboard full of safe foods in my pantry—oatmeal, beans, hundred-calorie snack packs. Because buying Oreos only creates temptation, and all the fitness magazines say “Keep this out of your kitchen!” So I blatantly lie to myself that the protein powder tastes just like Milo, or that there is no difference between the oven-burnt kale and my mother’s deep-fried, golden murukkus.

I will not leave the house until I lose a kilo or two—I already cannot see my ribs as prominently and it bothers me. Angrily, I numb my stomach as I chug three bottles of water at a go. Look, now I am full! I probably just mistook thirst for hunger! That’s what all the magazines say, and we all know that fitness articles are the holy grail.

But as usual, my stomach still keeps rumbling.

I decide to go for a stroll. Except this stroll is six MRT stations plus a twenty-minute walk away. I’m going to Tanglin Mall for groceries, because I need six-dollar organic tomatoes and sixteen-dollar free-range eggs to assure myself that these are okay to eat. I pass by the confectionery aisle and eye the chocolate bars in an almost perverted way, imagining what lies beneath its covers: its smell, size, hardness.

I choose one to buy as a treat.

And then I decide to pick up a few more for the next week. I also buy a loaf of pandan bread, and some cookies, crisps and ice cream, all for the family.

Back in the empty house, I cry on the kitchen floor as I shove slices of green toast down my throat into my overfed belly. I got too hungry and could not cook my eggs in time, so I picked up one cookie to tide me over. Then a chocolate bar. Then a bag of crisps, raisins, almonds, a chocolate bar, another chocolate bar, and another. I do not even like the smell of pandan.

I lie on the ground, sweat and tears forming a team as they roll down my face. If I cannot be empty, I have to be overflowing. There is no in-between, only an “eat everything, you are fat and have no self-control,” or a “don’t eat, you fat bitch.” I stop sobbing. A wave of exhaustion washes over me and my eyelids, heavy, stinging, shut themselves.

The next morning, I start over, because it is a new day and I can make up for mistakes by running, starving, and more running. My life is all about repetition because I thrive on routine, and a break in routine is a breakdown.

My breakfast gets cold as it sits untouched on the table—three eggs and two rashers of back bacon doused in *lal mirch* (Ma’s special chili powder that mingles perfectly in her fish curry) to assert my Asian spice tolerance. Everything has been perfectly measured and accounted for on *Myfitnesspal* of course, and in a minute, I will methodically slice my meal apart before eating each mouthful *very thoughtfully*. It is ten in the morning and training starts in an hour.

By noon, I find that I have lain on my old mattress for the past two hours. A spring sticks out and digs into my side, and a blanket that I’ve outgrown in length barely covers my shins. The pain transcends physical discomfort. I claw Ma’s arm in an attempt to alleviate the agony, and my jagged nails dig into and scrape across her flesh. She is quiet as she gently runs her free hand through my unwashed hair. I scream at her and tell her she will never understand my torment.

“I know,” she says.

*

I manage to cry myself to sleep but wake up to Ma's slow breaths with the occasional half-snore or grunt in half-hour intervals as she sleeps. The ceiling fan is at the slowest speed but she has covered her feet with a garish pink cashmere blanket. Ma hates being cold. She often jokes that she moved from the sand dunes of Rajasthan to Singapore because she hated the wintry desert nights. Leave it to Ma to love the desert for its forty-degree heat.

Tiny Kira, my mild-natured Chihuahua, is snuggled in between her legs. The two females had been up since the crack of dawn, one preparing breakfast and a packed lunch for her husband and the other sniffing and pleading for said meals. It is harder for Ma to see with her left eye now; the lump in her eyelid is swollen ever so slightly more in the mornings. Sometimes it waters so much that I mistake it for tears until I recall the recent defect. I wonder, though, if I have ever overlooked her tears.

“Pagal, Ma ko kabhi rote hoye dekha hai?” Crazy girl, have you ever seen your mother cry? I imagine her responding to my absurd thought.

Ma is the Indian housewife you see in the movies: a bit of a nag, but always full of good advice and life hacks. Rough palms, swollen knuckles, and chipped nails. Yet her fingers are slender, and her hands oddly beautiful. Ma has a long, craned neck and a large, strong back which she slumps forward, as if carrying the burden of our entire family. I have always thought that Ma is beautiful, but overweight. I have blamed her for the bad genetics and our unhealthy childhood diet of Calbee chips with dal and rice. I have blamed her for being hefty, which has led to my suffering.

I hear the television. Ma is watching Ganesh, Lakshmi, and Krishna in their flashy, gaudy costumes during Sunday afternoon prime time television. I catch myself sneer, and then enter the living room,

ready to pick a fight. Like poking her with a large stick, I ask what happens when we die. Ma says that when you are lowered into the grave, it is a long deep sleep.

Ma, I need a long deep sleep.

I am tired of running from all these thoughts in my head. Ma does not know that every night when I say I am going to sleep, I lay awake in my pitch-dark room, counting fireflies beneath my eyelids. Fireflies, not sheep. My teacher from when I was six once said I was silly for thinking that there were fireflies in my room when I proudly declared them in a list of “Living Things in My House”. I remember everyone laughing at me that day. But I still see my fireflies. Each night they circle before my eyes, and I silently wish that they did not have to carry my weight on their tiny wings.

Ma says that after death there is nothing but darkness.

But Ma, why then is it so dark now?

*

In school they called me Maggi Mee because my curly hair grew wild and untamed, like the dreams of my six-year old self. That’s when I started realising that I was different: the spirals from my roots; the way I towered over boys my age; and how my school uniforms had to be ordered directly from the manufacturer because the vendors never kept anything above XL. I hated being big.

Over the next few years, my body went from Big, to Slightly Less Big, to Medium. But there I was, still bigger than both my female and male friends. So I had to get Small. Once I reached Thin, I realised that I still towered over most of my friends. Then, I went on to be Smallest. Emaciated, almost corpse-like, I wore the tiniest sized dresses and had the narrowest waist, so I knew I had finally attained my goal.

I also knew this because I lost all my friends. Apparently, eating disorders do not make you very sociable or pleasant to be around.

I was void of emotion, my hairy face and lack of periods made me feel less of a woman, and I was always freezing. Have you seen anyone wearing a sweater at noon in a tropical country? You have your maniac right here. Ultimately, my bones and almost-concave belly were on display for two years before being forced into half-hearted recovery. The specialist said it was for my mother, my father, my education, and a few more years of life.

But what about for me?

*

Over the next two years, I saw the needle on the weighing scale creep higher and higher as my jeans got tighter and tighter. I had thrown away all my old clothes and refused to buy new ones, so I tried my best not to leave the house. After all, nighties always fit. Soon enough, my weight was restored and I had “recovered”, so they discharged me from the eating disorder clinic.

But I found new ways to be obsessed: powerlifting competitions that required staying under a strict weight limit, counting macronutrients to track my progress, subsisting on protein powder and tinned green beans. And then binging on pizza and ice cream on weekends, crying helplessly on the floor until Monday morning rolled around.

It was fine though — I stayed at 69 kilos and looked healthy.

“It’s okay, I’m an athlete.”

“Really, it’s fine, I am just disciplined.”

And no, I cannot do dinner on Saturday, I have plans with a spoon, a tub of Ben and Jerry’s, and my kitchen floor.

*

The ice cream is warm and melted when I open the tub; the freezer has stopped working. I am angry. I throw the pint across the platform into the sink. This was the only thing that could have made me happy, even if only for minutes. Ma is scared; her wonky eye is brimming. She tells me not to worry and that she is going to the shop to get more ice cream.

Ma closes the gate behind her. She scurries across the main road towards the grocery store. I notice she has forgotten to change out of her bedroom slippers.

Ma, I am sorry. Maybe somewhere else will be half as cold as me.

Muscle Memory

Deesha Menon

the body remembers
its light-skinned lovers
whose embers of desire
light gold stars

quivering thighs,
breathless sighs,
a gliding ritual of acceptance

the body covets
eventual commitment,
colour-corrected and
newly swathed by the
fabric of approval

yet my flesh is shackled to a poor
imitation of discord;
i'm told that race isn't left at the altar

while it is not my job
to decolonise
your petty perceptions
of my brown body
as some sort of palatable,
epicurean,
rent-free utopia:
eu-topos, the good place
inasmuch as it was *ou-topos*,
the place that can never be

still, the body keeps score.

The Prayer Mat

Wisha Jamal

Her mother died on the prayer mat. Later that day, Amal was called to move the body. According to her aunt who shared the apartment with her mother, no one else could do it.

Aunt Tania herself was too old to lift her younger sister's body; the fear was that she might croak too because of the exertion. The neighbours could not be called because the fact that the woman had died mid-prayer would be instantly classified as an affront to God and fuel gossip for weeks. Apparently, neither Aunt Tania nor her mother's spirit would ever be able to live down that shame. (Not that her mother needed to live down anything anymore.) And anyway, Amal was so surprised at being contacted at all that she was unable to think of a single good reason for why she could not come lift her mother's corpse off the ground.

Two hours later when her aunt—a woman who seemed to be collapsing in on herself with age—wordlessly let her into the small apartment, Amal was still numb from surprise. Her aunt stared at her mutely for a minute, pity and uncertainty obvious in her swollen eyes. The older woman's lips were slightly parted, as if she had something to say. Maybe she could not decide whether or not to console the niece she had not seen in years. Or maybe she was reconsidering calling Amal to begin with. In the end she simply gestured towards the bedroom and said:

“She's in there.”

In the room, Amal's mother was still sprawled on the floor—eyes shut, a scarf wrapped around her hair and back hunched forwards. Of course this was how she died. The older woman's expression was peaceful. Amal sincerely hoped that her mother was not at peace.

The young woman had imagined this moment many times. Well, not this exact moment but she had often wondered whether she would feel anything. She did not. Not really. Except maybe mild

irritation. Her mother had not been a part of her life for a while now; today it seemed like reality had finally caught up.

Despite her annoyance, she understood why Aunt Tania had pushed this on her. The stillness of the barely furnished, dimly lit room was unsettling. It was not cold but Amal shivered anyway. No one wanted to touch death and accidentally damn themselves. And she was damned anyway right? At least her mother had thought so.

She squatted down next to the body. Her mother's face looked especially pale against the rich red prayer mat. The careful silver embroidery on the cloth gleamed even in the dim light of the room—its threads keeping the secrets of her mother's final words. Amal did not recognize this one, she realised. The woman must have bought a new one in the time they were not speaking. The cloth felt soft and unused, but despite its seeming newness, Amal could still smell the faint traces of chai and cardamom that came from all her mother's prayer mats.

A copy of the Quran lay on the floor, near her mother's head. Maybe the woman had knocked it down as she prayed—or as she died. It was the only sign that something was amiss; her mother would never have left the Quran on the floor.

In that moment, it occurred to her that if one ignored the odd angle of her mother's head, it almost looked like she was still praying. The sight felt strangely familiar even though Amal had not seen her pray in years. Not because her mother did not pray—no, she had always been a devout woman—but because she stopped praying around Amal long before they stopped talking.

"I can't do it with you here. It doesn't feel right to ask God for forgiveness when someone who laughs in His face is sitting right there," she had said the one time Amal made the mistake of asking. "But maybe if you got help for y-your condition, we could pray together again." And then her mother smiled at her as if she had not just cut Amal open.

After that, Amal did not let her then-girlfriend sleep over at her apartment for a month; she did not want anyone to watch her cry herself to sleep. She waited for an apology that did not come. They never mentioned that conversation again and God got added to the growing list of things they just did not talk about, right up there with her parents' divorce and Auntie Naila's affair.

Her hands trembled as they reached to pull the body upright. She was not entirely sure why. Leaning forward, she carefully placed her mother's limp arms around her own neck and hoisted the body onto her back. The body on her back felt alien. It was not the mother she remembered—it was too cold, too light, too unmoving to be her.

As she carried her mother towards the unmade bed, the only unkempt part of the room, she was very aware of the way in which things came full circle. It felt odd to carry the woman who had carried her around for so many years. She could still vividly recall happy nights from her childhood when a younger Amal would insist on being carried to bed on her mother's back. The memory made it harder to feel nothing.

“How did we get here?” Amal whispered, setting the body down on the bed. She glanced at the pictures on the bedside table. These were the only proof that the lifeless body in front of her had once led a full life. Some were from her mother's college days while the rest were of family. There was a noticeable absence of any pictures of Amal above the age of fourteen. Maybe because pictures of an older Amal reminded her mother of what she had become in adulthood. Her fists clench at the thought, nails digging into palms.

What her mother had never really understood was that Amal did not ‘become’ anything; that smiling fourteen-year-old had just been blissfully ignorant to what she already was. Her mother was dead. She knew she should be sad. Anyone else in her position would have been. And this was a terrible thought to have but standing in that almost empty bedroom, a part of her was just relieved. She was relieved because maybe now that her mother was gone, Amal could stop reliving their last encounter nearly two years ago.

When her mother had finally found out about Amal, she did not rage or cry as Amal had expected her to. Instead, she disappeared into her room and prayed for hours. Once she was done praying, her mother insisted on two rules: that the family would never find out, and that Amal would never introduce her to any of her partners because the older woman did not want ‘any of that nonsense under her roof’.

But a year after that Amal was being invited to weekly dinners with her mother again, which was a huge step up from their brief phone calls thrice a year. Things between them finally seemed okay. And Amal and Sarah had been together by that point. So, Amal thought that *maybe* her mother was ready to grow up. She picked a day her aunt would not be home and showed up with Sarah and a bouquet of yellow chrysanthemums—her mother’s favorite.

She had been dead wrong. Her mother did not say a word to them. The look of pure disgust on her face spoke for itself. She just threw the flowers at their feet and slammed the door shut. A few days after, she got a call from Aunt Tania asking her to never call or visit again.

Amal knew better than to wait for an apology that time.

Even now, the lingering anger from the memory made the apartment feel hostile. She did not want to be there; near the body of a stranger, in this room that she had been erased from. She hastened towards the door. A last glance around the room reminded her that the prayer mat was still on the floor.

It was practically an extension of her mother. As far as Amal was concerned, it was the worst part of her. But something in her wanted to take it home. She had no use for it—she had not prayed in years. Maybe she would burn it later or cut it up into pieces or throw it away. But for now, she picked it up and buried it in her tote bag.

She was almost out of the apartment when her aunt’s voice came from behind,

“So that’s it then. You’re leaving?”

“Yes.”

A pause.

“Will you come to the funeral? The others are flying in tomorrow.”

Amal didn’t respond. She didn’t know the answer. Instead she asked,

“Did she ever mention me?”

“No.”

*

On the drive back, Amal thought that in a way, it was good her mother never talked about her. She was off the hook now. She would not go to the funeral. She would not feel guilty. She would not be ashamed. And for the rest of the drive, she repeated this thought like a mantra—or a broken cassette.

Her apartment was still empty when she arrived home; Sarah had not returned from work yet. She let herself in and, not bothering to turn on the lights despite the approaching evening, collapsed on the couch. She felt exhausted. Like she had been holding her breath for hours and now her body ached from the effort.

She leaned across the coffee table to rummage for the remote amid the stack of old DVDs that neither of them could be bothered to clear away. The silence was becoming overwhelming - it was

too much like her mother's bedroom—so she turned on the TV to drown it out. The third season of the Bachelor began playing—just last night she and Sarah had spent hours laughing at it but right now, it was meaningless noise.

Unable to concentrate on the show, she turned her attention to the prayer mat peeking out from her tote-bag. The gaudy red and silver looked out of place against their secondhand couch. She pulled it out entirely—shuddering slightly as she held it—and breathed in the familiar scent of her mother. It was strangely comforting and distressing at the same time.

Amal still did not understand why she took it, just that she had to. She put it in her lap and stared. Maybe if she stared at it long enough, she would find out what her mother was praying for. She would find out whether the woman ever thought of Amal in her prayers.

But the embroidered fabric refused to give up its secrets.

It was only when Sarah returned home hours later and found her hunched over the prayer mat in the darkness that Amal realised that she had been crying into it. As Sarah pulled her into a hug, Amal wondered how one person could shatter her heart so completely, over and over again.

Microaggressions at the Dentist's (A Pantoum)

Jayashree Panicker

Dental appointments, a treat for the teeth.
My dentist is armed to the teeth with repartee.
He shoots his mouth off as I bare my teeth,
shoving wisecracks down my throat.

My dentist is armed to the teeth with repartee.
Once, he said, "You've got good gums for an Indian!"
shoving wisecracks down my throat.
I laugh from the other side of my mouth.

Once he said, "You've got good gums for an Indian!"
A slip of the tongue? Tongue in cheek?
I laugh from the other side of my mouth.
Through my gaping mouth, I can't find my tongue.

A slip of the tongue? Tongue in cheek?
The words are at the tip of my tongue, a proper tongue-lashing.
Through my gaping mouth, I can't find my tongue.
He's scraping plaque lodged between my teeth.

The words are at the tip of my tongue, a proper tongue-lashing.
You guttermouth! Watch your own mouth!
He's scraping plaque lodged between my teeth.
I imagine my canines sinking down on his gloved fingers.

You guttermouth! Watch your own mouth!
Zip that lip! Let me show you some teeth!
I imagine my canines sinking down on his gloved fingers.
I grit my teeth. I rinse my foaming mouth.

Zip that lip! Let me show you some teeth!
Dental appointments, hardly a treat,
I grit my teeth. I rinse my foaming mouth.
He shoots his mouth off. I long to bare my teeth.

Colour

Jyot Bhalla

Is it my fault
that it is within
mama's black and mehndi-streaked hair,
and papa's greying beard,
that I find
the most colour?

Contributors

Shreya Acharya



Shreya crafted her first poem when she was four, and fell in love with writing ever since. Her first story was published in The Epigram Books Collection of Best New Singaporean Short Stories (Volume Four), and she is currently the Editor for ASIAN Geographic magazine. She loves reading, and feels naked without a book in her bag at all times.

Rohini Anant



Rohini is currently pursuing a master's degree in Geography at National University of Singapore. Writing is a recent venture that helps to articulate her complicated thoughts. Having lived in Singapore all her life, she is curious about what it would be like to spend some years in India.

Yvonne Arivalagan



Yvonne is a Singaporean Tamil woman who likes to observe the things people do not say, as much as the things they do. She enjoys reading historical and science-fiction novels and loves when the two come together. She aspires to write stories about those often erased by history, many of whom probably look like her.

Fazila Banu



Fazila is a Tamil-speaking Singaporean born to immigrant parents from Tamil Nadu. She graduated from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) with a degree in English Literature and a second major in Public Policy and Global Affairs. Currently a teacher trainee at National Institute of Education (NIE), she enjoys playing with her two kitty-in-laws.

Kaamela Barvin



Kaamela is a Year 2 English Literature student at Nanyang Technological University (NTU). She writes about the confining physical and emotional realities of being an Indian woman and the freeing, even transcending power of money. As she grows older, she finds that the two interestingly converge with another.

Jyot Bhalla



Jyot is neither a poet nor a photographer, but she spends most of her time doing what one would expect such persons to be doing. She creates art to better understand what makes us human and has a tendency to romanticise the mundane. On a less pretentious note, she is an entrepreneur and does not like chai.

Wisha Jamal



Wisha is a second-year Pakistani student based in Singapore, at Yale-NUS College. She dabbles in literary and speculative fiction. Inspired by her literary idols, Arundhati Roy and Anita Desai, she is currently working on a short story anthology centered around the daily lives of those who exist on the margins of South Asian societies - hopefully she'll someday manage to get it published!

Deesha Menon



Deesha is a 24-year-old writer born and raised in Singapore. Her identity as a brown woman guides a big part of how she sees and experiences the world along with her relationships with other people. Some of her favourite things to read & write about include race, women, displacement, self-love, loss, mental health, sex, and sexuality.

Jayashree Panicker



Jayashree is a Singaporean writer. She holds an MA in Creative Writing from Lasalle College of the Arts. Her short fiction has appeared in Quarterly Literary Review of Singapore.

Vaishnavi Pumynathan



Vaishnavi is a freelance editor and copywriter. Her poetry has been published in *Press: 100 Love Letters*, *Harpoon Review*, *Colombia Journal*, *Eunoia Review*, *Glitterwolf Magazine* and others. She lives in Singapore with her husband and cats.

Sanusha S Sritharan



Sanusha calls Singapore home, having lived here for ~70% of her life. Her writing has been heard once at an open-mic but is rarely seen by eyes other than hers. She deals with red tape for a living, and dances, writes and paints (in decreasing order of competence) on the side for sanity.

Ummi Tasfia



Tasfia spent her toddler years on ships before anchoring in Singapore. She was an Australian Poetry Slam State Finalist (2017), YODA Slam Champion (2018) and represented Singapore at the Causeway Exchange Slam in 2018 and 2019. She was published in the 'Fight Evil with Poetry' anthology in the US (2018).

Anittha Thanabalan



At the age of twelve, Anittha's first book was five chapters of comic sans font. Her debut novel, *The Lights That Find Us*, shortlisted for the 2018 Epigram Books Fiction Prize, was thankfully spared the same fate. Efforts to keep herself and her dog alive include freelance writing and tutoring English Literature. Some of her favourite things to do are walking her poodle, trying to rap Twista's *Overnight Celebrity* without passing out and reimagining the final season of *Game of Thrones*. Anittha is currently working on her second novel.