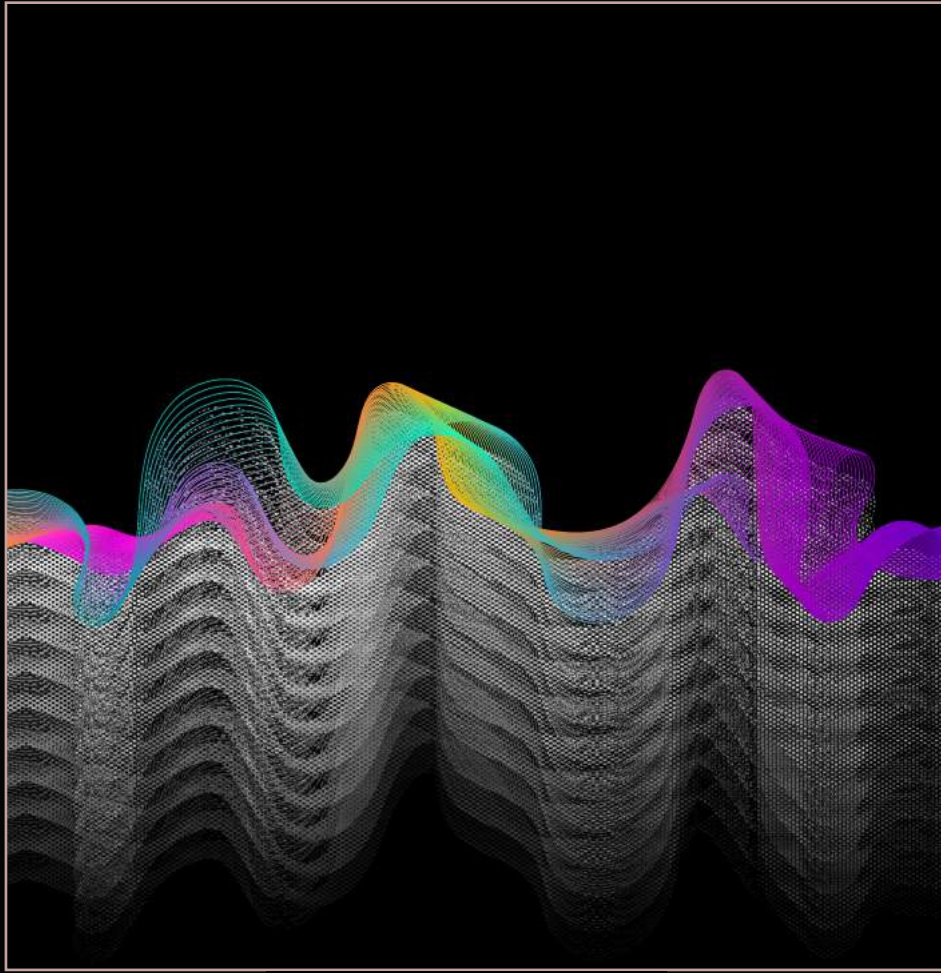


Soundscapes

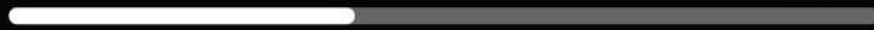
issue 3



mahogany journal

edited by prasanthi ram & jaryl george solomon

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Issue 3: Soundscapes, September 2021

Edited by Prasanthi Ram and Jaryl George Solomon

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Contents

Editor's Note

Poetry Editor

Jaryl George Solomon

We're Just Dancing the Night Away

5-7

Fiction Editor

Prasanthi Ram

In a World of Mamis and Enjaamis

8-10

Contributors' Works

Poetry

I want to fall in love the way Deepika dances in Deewani Mastani

Laili Abdeen

11

Poetry

A love, for every time.

Sarah Farheenshab Begum

12-13

Fiction

That Moonless Evening

Ranjini Ganapathy

14-18

Poetry

Odours of Jasmine

Subash Kumar

19

Fiction

The Last Revival

Gayathrii Nathan

20-27

Poetry

If You Asked Her How Long It Took To Drive From Bukit Purmei To Woodlands On A
Sunday Evening, She'll Tell You It Takes Exactly Half The Veer-Zaara Soundtrack

Kiran Kaur Dhalimal

28-29

Prose

Queer at the Bollywood Club

Mrigaa Sethi

30-32

Poetry

Urvasi Urvasi

Pooja Nansi

33

Accompanying Playlist

 [Spotify](#) 

Contributors

34-36

Editor's Note (Poetry)

Jaryl George Solomon

We're Just Dancing the Night Away

The mellow and steady drumming of a tabla sits at the back of synth waves that slowly wash out of the speakers like dark water thirstily reaching for the shore at night. All around me, flushed faces of teenagers ready to grab the reins on their newfound journey in junior college perk up. Everyone is completely drained from a night of campfire songs and games but the palpitations from the drumbeats ripple through our bodies, magnetically pulling us into huddles around the gargantuan school hall that is humid with the weight of lingering sweat. Soon, the beats crescendo and are briefly drowned out by screams from all of the students present. This is our moment, we have been practising the steps tirelessly throughout the week of orientation programme. As soon as Vasundhara Das' voice seeps in, every single body simultaneously side-hops while pumping our thumbs up in the air. The humidity that has been stubbornly clinging on to the air hurriedly dissipates with the rush of flailing arms and manic kicks. We are all smiling and moving in unison - side-shuffling and dipping till our Dri-FIT tees can no longer handle our fervour. I turn and catch a glimpse of the face belonging to my Geography rep. She is bursting with youthful zeal along with the other girls from Crescent. The sweat-drenched arm of my best friend from secondary school grazes my own and things feel right and infinite as we are deliriously echoing the titular phrase from the song: "It's the time to disco!"

Unbeknownst to me, what happened to be an innocent mass dance song morphed into an emotional imprint, forever locking the people I loved in that moment to how I felt about the world, a world that was yet to fully unfold to a bright-eyed 18-year-old boy who is now forever sunbleached and faded away. However morose it sounds, that was how my (often frazzled) mind filtered the theme for Issue 3 - *Soundscapes*. The term conjures snippets of my being traversing multiple emotional terrains, each tagged with its own soundtrack. Though I barely understood many of the songs that would play in the background on weekend afternoons while I was cramped on a weathered sofa in the living room, I remember making my own associations to the soundtracks of Bollywood and Kollywood cinema that my mother would religiously unwind to after lunch was served. *Anjali Anjali* reminded me of all the times my baby sister and I would fight over our shared green Gameboy on

the balcony floor. I loved how she would verbalise all the sound effects that blasted from the gaming console in her toddler babble and how I would maniacally pinch her cherubic cheeks only to send her running away from me. More importantly, I fondly remember feeding my sister her first Cornetto and invading her Barbie dollhouse with my Blue Ranger action figure. Of course, my life was nowhere near the celluloid one of the film's but the upbeat chorale of children in that song will forever remind me of two children who were a lot closer then than now.

Similarly, other South Asian songs I barely understood linguistically still managed to anchor themselves within my life. My mornings were always brightened by my father's blasting of *Made in India* whenever it came on Channel V. The house would reverberate with Alisha Chinai's voice while I frantically put on my socks before dashing out of the house to catch the school bus at 6:15am. Skipping the beats several years ahead, K.J. Yesudas' *Amma Endrazhaikatha* would play in my head on repeat as I helped my mother dress the mouth of her gaping wound from her mastectomy. Not long after, M.I.A's *Matangi Mixtape for Kenzo* was on a constant Youtube loop as I found myself constantly alone rushing papers in a school library a million miles away from my mother's sambar and rasam. Despite my abysmal knowledge of the languages that these songs were artfully crafted in, these soundscapes managed to keep me sane and imprinted on me the histories that make my brown body mine. Whatever has been said about the transcendental power of music rings 100% true!

Unsurprisingly, the +65 South Asian is dissected and celebrated in a corresponding way through the mesh of songs and rich personal histories embodied by the poets selected for this issue. Each poet treats the parallels between their chosen song(s) and histories as an avenue for the reader to be confronted with the complexities and realities of being a +65 South Asian in the present. In Laili Abdeen's piece, the image of Mastani melds with the persona as she too goes in search of the ever elusive love. In contrast, Sarah Farheenshah Begum explores the connecting thread that unites lovers across eras framed by her chosen soundscape. The theme of love once again emerges but as an unwavering flame that pains the persona in Subash Kumar's prose poem. A literal soundtrack forms the backdrop for Kiran Kaur Dhaliwal's piece where we follow her persona's revelations on a ride back home. Finally, Pooja Nansi rounds up the poetry selection for this issue with her ode to Prabhu Deva and his irresistible yet irreproducible swag.

I am so incredibly proud and grateful to have worked with each and every poet in fleshing out this issue. Each of them has taught me that I am not alone in vibing to the soundscapes that have made up my own +65 South Asian experience, despite my struggles to understand the language. Music is truly universal and uniting in its essence. I hope the culmination of this issue (through the hard work of the contributors and editors alike) presents you with an opportunity to rekindle with the soundtracks of our youth and rediscover the beauty behind these South Asian beats. After all, the night is still young and there is no better time to disco than now.

Dancing the night away on two left feet,

Jaryl George Solomon

Editor's Note (Fiction)

Prasanthi Ram

In a World of Mamis and Enjaamis

If you had told my younger self that a famous American talk show host would one day plug a song by a Singaporean Indian rapper, I would have laughed in your face. But in July 2021, that was precisely what happened. Yung Raja's addictive bilingual track *Mami* got a shout-out on Jimmy Fallon's *The Tonight Show*. This was monumental, even if Fallon did not seem so thrilled by the repetitive chorus (which I personally deem unfair given the astounding number of American songs that rely on such choruses).

You see, Yung Raja emerges from a generation of Tamil kids who grew up on Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan. My generation. The now nostalgic nineties. Kids of an A R Rahman diet who danced to *Mukkala Mukkaba* as if they were Prabhu Deva or imagined love to be as pure as Shalini and Maddy's smitten smiles in *Pachai Nirame*. To us, the worlds of American music and Tamil/Indian music were always separate. I was the child who loved *Oops I Did It Again* and *Kaatre En Vaasal* in the same year, two songs that could not be more different from each other. When Aishwarya Rai, who began her career in the 1997 Tamil film *Iruvar*, crossed over into Hollywood in 2004 with her first English-language film *Bride and Prejudice*, it was an exception, not a merger of two worlds. When Akon sang *Chammak Challo* in 2011, it was an anomaly within an otherwise predictable soundscape. But with *Mami*, and arguably the rest of Yung Raja's discography in relation to a larger narrative of diasporic music, these worlds melt into a layered, heterogenous soundscape. If one can get past the smokescreen of repetition, one will realise that *Mami* is not just Spanish slang for an attractive woman or an English homophone but also means "auntie" in Tamil. On his track, Raja raps about an attractive woman, a mami "in a saari not a skirt" who is a "freak for sure" for wanting "that thaali". As the repetition ascends into almost a mantra, the Tamil woman of his bilingual imagination takes centerstage where she both is desirable and desires without any inhibition.

Earlier in the same month that *Mami* was released, *Enjoy Enjaami* (Enjoy My Lord) blew up on YouTube, taking over the top trending page alongside best-selling Korean pop artists, and became a viral sensation within and beyond the Indian diaspora. Released by maajja, A R Rahman's new music

platform for independent musicians, *Enjoy Enjaami* was the lyrical brainchild of Dalit activist-rapper Arivu. He performs the track alongside Sri Lankan Tamil playback singer Dhee. Merging tropical beats with rap and oppari, a Tamil folk style of lamentation that is usually sung at funerals, the song is a powerful ode to and an elegy for the generations of agricultural workers who have “planted five trees” and “nourished a beautiful garden” but whose “throats remain parched”. They are unappreciated, undercompensated, and without any ownership over the lands they toiled over. The cinematic music video, which opens with a thrilling parai sequence (a drum traditionally associated with funerals), marries aesthetic and authenticity by featuring Arivu’s grandmother Valliamma, whose story inspired *Enjoy Enjaami*, as well as real-life rural workers from his hometown in Tiruvannamalai. Each time I listen to the song, I am moved to tears. *What’s the matter, my sugarcane? What’s the matter, my darling grandson?* The buildup of the music and the aural textures of the lamentation always speak to this raw, primal and non-verbal part of me; it is impossible to fully articulate just how powerful it is. Many YouTube reactors, even those outside of the South Asian diaspora, have expressed a similar reaction; under such videos are often comments from Tamils attributing their reactions to the innate power of oppari, that music can evoke deep emotion in us even across language barriers.. If one were to take into consideration the historical contexts of both Dalit Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils, the impact of the song only swells into majestic proportions. In my humble opinion, the sublime and poetic blend of the aural, lyrical and visual in *Enjoy Enjaami* is worth a legion of essays. (That and the constant erasure of Arivu, which is absolutely deplorable—shame on you Rolling Stones India.)

Now that I have waxed lyrical about the two 2021 tracks that have made me incredibly excited and proud to be a part of the Tamil and South Asian diasporas, let me return to the point of this editor’s note. That is, music has the propensity to hold space for our diasporic complexities. Music holds the immense power to transcend the arbitrary yet defining boundaries we are born into. In a world where Yung Raja raps interchangeably between English and Tamil, Jason Derulo makes jalebis on Tiktok to promote his feature on Canadian-Indian Teshar’s viral *Jalebi Baby* (a feature Derulo himself sought out) and DJ Snake participates on a remix of *Enjoy Enjaami*, music has the unparalleled power to speak us into existence—no, propel us into confident exuberance.

That is why we narrowed in on the soundscapes of the +65 South Asian for our third issue. What are the South Asian songs that have spoken you into existence then and now? Who are the South

Asian musicians who enable you to embrace all your cultural complexity? Are there songs that delineate time for you into before and after? Which songs hold past versions of you that are ready to be resurrected at the sound of the first chord? Which songs make you hopeful for the future?

I for one have so many answers to give you. The iconic *Kaadhalan* soundtrack that defined my early years even before I began learning the curves and edges of the Tamil alphabet. Simple sa re ga ma's at my childhood Carnatic singing classes that still sound superior to the Western music scale. The earlier mentioned *Pachai Nirame* that made me realise the poetry inherent in the Tamil language—where else would I read a gorgeous comparison between the colour red and a baby's foot that has not yet touched the earth? *Honey* by South Asian sapphic goddess Raveena who sings like a languorous Sunday afternoon dream. All these songs remind me that being South Asian means to be abundant, to overflow and demolish the boxes we are pigeonholed into. There is so much to us; how can anyone possibly tell us otherwise?

Our fiction and prose writers had their own answers as well. Ranjini Ganapathy reimagines the sixties Tamil classic *Unnai Ondru Ketpen* for a contemporary tale about a widow on her deathbed. Gayathri Nathan brings us into a speculative future where late loved ones can be resurrected through a process known as the Revival and are eased into the disorienting process with a song they liked in their last life—in this case, it is S P Balasubrahmanyam's soothing *Nilave Vaa*. Last but not least, Mrigaa Sethi, through a spellbinding patchwork of Bollywood bangers such as *I Am A Disco Dancer* and *Dum Maro Dum*, examines queerness in the heart of Magic Carpet, a well-loved Bollywood nightclub in Singapore that has incidentally been suspended since the pandemic.

We hope that through reading this issue and listening to the accompanying playlist, you too resurrect your own +65 South Asian soundscape. And if you are not one of us, we are confident that you will discover a new artist or song through our eight wonderful contributors. After all, our soundscapes are gloriously abundant.

Mami signing off,

Prasanthi

I want to fall in love the way Deepika dances in Deewani Mastani

Laili Abdeen

Mastani's foot grazes across the floor / dipping into Shaniwar Wada / arching her back / she is immersed in golden mirrors of the palace / buoyant / with every flux in melody / every rhythm every beat / whispering anklets round her feet / inviting the Peshwa / her eyes shine for her unmoving spectator / a spotlight for the man on the throne / of a dais she cannot share / yet / she thrusts her body towards the thread of romance / steady as a needle / every curl swirling / every twirl unfurling / folds of her anarkali hidden with a declaration of love / Mastani glides her hands / flicking away doubts from her parents / distasteful rumours condemning her heritage ricocheting / and I am tugged / along with her gaze / I am circling like a bird of prey / I am praying with my eyes tracing every spinning detail / every coral tainted face of Yusof Ishak in my bedazzled wallet / every Google search / every Instagram dive / every stroke as I swim through streets of Tekka / every *for you sister I can give discount* / for every bargain in the building / for that golden dress / for anything / to plunge me into glimmering dreams / fantasies sparkling with forbidden feats / promises of love beyond the gleam of smartphones / of grand gestures beyond GrabFood surprises / swept by a mirage of desires / into a drowning reality / of my adolescent reverie / jolted by how love isn't embroidered in a five hundred dollar outfit

A love, for every time.

Sarah Farheenshah Begum

Next to my father, I fold my legs on our sofa
Anarkali sighs, here comes our lady of the ghanta
the fan turns its head, garmi air in my face
the belt begins, Salim's caught in a daze.

Khameez in a ghumana right before
her stunt double's knees caress the floor,
payal to jhankar, dance of grace
a clash of laal to haara,
Sa Re Ga Ma sets the pace.

Bahaar on screen all the way from Bahru,
retreats from the throne,
with her snake-poisoned brew
kaala dupatta around her jealous frown
no match for ishq, Salim forgoes his crown.

The focus shifts to Madhubala's chehra,
stung by romantic passion so gehra,
announcing to the world, the technicoloured scheme
kismet loses to naseeb, a martyr's dream
taala-hitting heels on a marble sheen,
her smile is calm, accepting death as serene.

Neela by khoon, nazron with junoon.
marmareen voice to the face of a moon.
Anarkali's longing, I follow through mirrors.
shattered by rules, I hum to its chorus.
U.P folk song donned by 1960s ghazals,
480p quality, her ghagra tussles.

This ghaana is one that I hold close,
memorised lyrics to a matching pose,
I sing in repeat with both my behne,
scarves to hips in our childhood nachne,
running the minute we have nazreen
chope-ing our hidden corners
hoping no one would've seen.
Mama Lemon plate on a cushion on my lap,

Watching songs every Sunday, tracing a musical map.
My Abba left his desh for Singapore,
my Amma switched her faith, to love him more.
Bharatanatyam dancer who then was stung
by a man from the gaanv, so they married young.

Ran away to Dover Road, in a one-room dingy flat.
lived away from the rest, drove our relatives mad.
Dada had died, so there was no defence,
when Dadi chased them out for their romantic offence.
Atha hadn't lived too long to see this though,
but Tata made it hard, by the time I'd lived to know.
Pinned to the archaic Mughal family tree,
was this part of our lives, a matching kahaani?

On the roof of Kallang Wave Mall,
the sun lies back for Lataji's call,
My humsafar and I seated on a stone bench,
CBD skyline can make the heart clench.
A pair of earphones split to connect two
The courtesan sings, as if right on cue.
Between whiffs of sambrani
and hands that pray differently,
is a life of my parents retold in symphony.

I rest my elbow on my right knee,
as despair is best sung in poetry.
The forbidden enveloped in misery,
Mughal cree wins best-dressed in Bollywood tragedy.

“Insan kisi se dunia mein, ek bar mohabbat karta hai.”

The struggle for love always takes us in reverse,
predicted karma, a recasted curse.
Lover to lover, takdir from above,
a repossessed tale I unintentionally serve.
We're no different from our Sharif-un Nissa,
reincarnated legends for every zamana.

That Moonless Evening

Ranjini Ganapathy

Susheela Samy, at the age of fifty, had died a widow. She never became the mother she had longed to be either. At least, that was what Tarani and the others around her thoughtlessly believed to be the tragic truth.

A couple of days before Auntie Susheela's death, Tarani, a first time mother, had finally brought her baby, Trishna, to meet her aunt for the very first time at Singapore General Hospital. It was the least ideal of locations but Auntie Susheela had been ill for some time, and was in and out of the hospital ever since renegade cancer cells began to ravage her body rapidly.

For months, the elders in the family had discouraged Tarani from bringing Trishna to the ward where Auntie Susheela was admitted. "That's no place to bring a baby, the people there are so sick." That was the general sentiment expressed. Auntie Susheela, too, seemed to think likewise. She told Tarani that she would be back home soon enough for them to pay her a visit at her Punggol flat. However, Tarani decided to remain resolute in her decision. It was the day that Trishna turned eight months old that she brought her to see Auntie Susheela.

The much awaited reunion did not feel like a celebration, though Trishna who sat on her grandaunt's lap was the happiest of the lot, clueless and smiling. Slumped in an armchair, Auntie Susheela struggled to prop herself up. Cancer from the breast had spread to her brain, spine, and lungs, making mobility a matter of extreme difficulty and excruciating pain. Still, she gently held Trishna, forcing a smile ever so faintly. Agony was written all over her face. The meeting was a brief and bittersweet affair which lasted no more than ten minutes. Auntie Susheela had to go lie down again.

Just two days later, Tarani went to visit her youngest maternal aunt again but this time without her baby. That moonless evening was like no other as Tarani failed to fight off the sting of tears that welled up in her eyes. From the sidelines, she watched helplessly, pregnant with the knowledge that her once lucid and conscious Sinamma was now faintly humming the lullaby of death.

Her chest and the tubes attached to her heavily sedated form heaved in response to the machine in command. The ventilator amplified her laboured breath, reducing her lungs to perform the perfunctory role of mechanical puppets for there was simply nothing Auntie Susheela could orchestrate on her own anymore.

As she continued to look at Auntie Susheela, one of the verses of her aunt's favourite Tamil song casually wafted into Tarani's consciousness. *Nilavilla vaanam. Neerilla megam. Pesaatha penmai. Paadathu unmai.* But there was no longer levity in these lyrics. Like a harbinger of bad news, they bore a sense of inescapable dreadfulness. *Nilavilla vaanam*, the moonless sky, and *neerilla megam*, the waterless cloud spoke of impossibilities. Auntie Susheela was dying and heading towards the point of no return. She herself embodied *pesatha penmai*, the feminine force who could no longer speak nor sing her ultimate truth, *unmai*. Soon, she would be forever silenced. Yet the song that meant the most to her would live on in Tarani's memories.

It had been in a tiny old flat at Commonwealth Crescent in the eighties, where Tarani, raised by her maternal grandparents, aunts and uncles, spoke in Tamil uninhibitedly. Auntie Susheela, with no background nor training in music whatsoever, appointed herself as Tarani's first singing teacher. It started out as an accidental pursuit of frivolity between a spirited teenager of nineteen and a three-year-old parrot of a toddler.

Since then, Auntie Susheela had always sung for as long as Tarani could remember, singing at various occasions, including a couple of local talent shows. Auntie Susheela belonged to the legion of music-lovers who swore by mainstream Tamil songs from the sixties and seventies to heal and soothe aches of the melancholic, sentimental soul. Her last performance was a few years ago, at Tarani's solemnisation ceremony where she sang to an especially appreciative audience. The song, the same one Tarani kept thinking of at the hospital, was a catchy number from the whodunit 60's classic *Pudhiya Paravai* that was incidentally sung by a popular playback singer, P. Susheela. Auntie Susheela idolised her namesake to no end, having scribbled the lyrics to her songs in many notebooks and committed them to memory by practising them over and over again. Upon Tarani's return from the hospital, the night only grew longer. Having nursed her baby to sleep, she had retreated to bed, exhausted. But Trishna, in her playpen, started to stir again, cooing gently. Sapped of energy, she simply stayed put, silently observing her daughter from a distance. Thankfully, the baby's eyes were still closed. How does time expand itself like this, Tarani wondered.

An entire lifetime of mothering seemed to await her. Yet the same could not be said for Auntie Susheela. Although her life as a former kindergarten teacher had been centred on nurturing young children for decades, she never became a mother. Guilt consumed Tarani. She had, in fact, been harbouring and dealing with these conflicted feelings ever since the day she learnt that she had fallen pregnant with Trishna. It was about the same time when Auntie Susheela was forced to confront her disease. Tarani was growing life inside of her while Auntie Susheela was fighting to save hers with all the courage she could muster from within.

Sleep continued to evade Tarani that night. The piercing blue light from her mobile phone only served to chase it further away into the shadowy corners of her bedroom. She scrolled through the barrage of old texts she had exchanged with Auntie Susheela, speed reading her way through some of them while pensively pausing at others. One exchange from months ago grabbed her attention. Auntie Susheela, at that point in time, had just seen her doctor earlier in the day for consultation after having undergone months of intensive treatment.

“Very sad.”

“Why? Are you ok?”

“Very sad, ma. Doc said my cancer has increased a bit.”

“So sorry to hear that, Auntie. Try to make yourself happy.”

“Ok.”

“What makes you happy?”

“Listening to old songs.”

Old songs. But, of course. What was Tarani to know about a Tamil movie song which preceded her birth by two whole decades, much less appreciate the lyrical genius of the late esteemed poet, Kannadasan? Yet, she had been taught to enunciate those words religiously, and there was no doubt that her tongue did roll in obedience and an eagerness to match the enthusiasm of her beloved aunt all those years ago.

Unnai ondru ketpen

Unmai solla vendum

Ennai paada sonnaal

Enna paada thonrum

“If I ask you something, you must tell me the truth. If you ask me to sing some song, what then comes to mind?” asked the lyrics unabashedly.

“Well, this,” answered Tarani.

In the movie, the heroine Saroja Devi, resplendent in a red saree shimmies, sashays, and sings at a party on board a cruise ship. The song was an elegant self-contained riddle. The female singer asked questions, allowing listeners to tease out answers for themselves, but only if they too, perhaps, appreciated a more traditional version of what was viewed as feminine charm. These revelations had only dawned upon Tarani now. Now that her aunt was slowly but surely departing for another realm, these lyrics drove her to dwell upon the meaning of Auntie Susheela’s life. What lies did she tell herself? What love did she yearn for? What losses ate her alive?

Their sixteen year age gap meant an easy-going adult friendship but so many truths were buried in a game of keeping up appearances. An avalanche of crushing personal defeats from multiple unsuccessful fertility treatments, one failed adoption process, and the sudden death of her spouse. A devastation so utterly incomprehensible and toxic, it manifested itself into a lump in her breast. One conclusive diagnosis, many rounds of chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and a mastectomy had all come to this point, this final stage in Auntie Susheela’s unexamined life.

In spite of all that she had experienced, there was a certain flippancy whenever Auntie Susheela relayed these events to her. Reading another set of messages, sent around the time of Tarani’s second trimester, made Tarani realise that Auntie Susheela’s pain went much deeper than what she wanted the people around her to believe.

“Hi Sinamma, how are you? I am still nauseous pretty much every day.”

“Alamak, still nauseous ah? I’m ok, ma. Tomorrow have to go hospital.”

“I think I am just one of those “unlucky” ones when it comes to morning sickness.”

“You’re born to be lucky. To be a mother. I’m not, ma.”

“Will pray for you, Sinamma.”

“Thanks, ma. Take care and rest well.”

Tarani thought about what must have made Auntie Susheela believe that marriage and motherhood were what it took to be deemed a fulfilled, complete woman.

The answers laid coolly in the lyrics.

Kaadhal paatu paada

Kaalam innum illai

Thaalaatu paada thaaiaagavillai

“The time has not come for me to sing a love song. Nor can I sing a lullaby for I have yet to become a mother.”

This was the soundtrack to Auntie Susheela’s life all along and she did everything within her power to chase those lines. It was then that Tarani vowed to hum the tune of this song to her daughter Trishna. It was more than just a lullaby too. It was a way for her to keep conversing with her aunt, even after she was gone. Trishna would not only be the medium but the recipient of this intimate gift of love. As Auntie Susheela slipped quietly into the early morning the following day, the world outside remained as unaffected as ever but Tarani kept mum with newfound realisations.

At last, Susheela Samy, at the age of fifty, died a woman who was once loved by a man but never got to be a mother. In Tarani’s eyes however, Auntie Susheela had died a mother in all the ways she could not see for herself. To mother was to bear witness to the child who came before you, asking to be seen. Auntie Susheela saw all the children who came before her, as a teacher, an aunt, and at the very end, a grandaunt. All those years and fleeting moments counted for something. All a kind of mothering.

Odours of Jasmine

Subash Kumar

It's another Sunday. No one's home. You finally sit, undisturbed, in the middle of your black vinyl sofa in your blue batik nightie. It's raining, so your son's damp fatigues hang inside the kitchen on coloured bamboo poles, taking on the smell of your kozhi curry and prawn sambal. The dusty blades of the Morries fan slowly dry your wet weary skin. Sun TV is playing different Tamil movie songs for the next hour, so you see Dhanush braiding Radhika's black bunned hair with pearls of white jasmine.

Malligapoo Vaasam Konjam Kathoda Veesa- the line goes.

He looks at her.

You look into yourself.

As an aluminium platter circles the house, another pottu-ed, sari-clad Saraswathi takes a string of jasmine and pins it on her wig, coyly. It comes by you but you swiftly pass it on to the next woman with a docile smile because you tell yourself, "I can't."

Ennodu Nee, Unnodu Naan, Onrodu Naam Ondraagum Naal- the line continues.

Can you remember the last time there was white jasmine on you?

Your husband dies of chronic lung cancer. You sit next to him, in your crimson wedding sari that you have only worn once-now twice. Your wrists are crammed with gold glass bangles, your forehead smeared with copious amounts of kungumam and your hair, that real hair, is pitied with a tiny wreath of white jasmine.

As they oil his arms in the casket, you shatter the bangles on your wrists. Sandanam is placed on his forehead and kungumam is removed from yours. The aunties let out an operatic wail as they strip the last bruised jasmine bud from your bold luminous hair.

"It's a custom," they say. Tears dribble down your still face.

The Last Revival

Gayathri Nathan

As Tata mouths the lyrics to *Nilavae Vaa*, I know I have picked the right Memory Trigger for his Revival.

Sure, his eyes are glazed over and he probably has not yet processed that we are in an Incubator. But he is calm. It is common knowledge among us Revivers that music functions as the best Memory Trigger. See, releasing a Returner's soul from the storage capsule is easy enough. Pop off the top and the soul flows out in glittering liquid. Quite gorgeous, really. Until souls adopt their corporeal forms again. They always react either anxiously or aggressively as their minds scramble to remember how to ask "Who are you?" "Where are we?" and, most importantly, "Who am I?" With the Returner's favourite song is playing in the background, though? At least Revivers would be able to bring them back to life without fearing for our own life.

Even so, I suppose I did not need job experience to know what song to use for today. This is my grandfather's Revival. I have waited years to use *Nilavae Vaa* to bring him back. Now, as I sit here, in an artificial rendering of our HDB flat living room from 2013 and watch my post-dead-pre-Revival grandfather slowly move his head along to the rhythm, I know I do not have to wait much longer.

Waiting is part of the process, though. The Revival process is more than just a reorientation to life. It is a legal necessity. Dead or alive, Returners cannot be Revived without consent. By that logic, lucidity must return before I bring out the consent forms. In this case, the administrative work feels more frustrating than usual. Yes, Returner Resistance is a thing but surely Tata would leap at the chance to come back.

"Nilavae vaa," S. P. Balasubrahmanyam croons.

"...sellaadhae vaa," Tata finishes the line, his voice crisp. He turns to look at me. Recognition fills his eyes and they widen, ever so slightly.

My breath catches. I have heard his voice in videos over the years but watching the spark come back into his eyes? *Damn.*

I had always planned to end my career by not just Sponsoring, but also Reviving my grandfather. It only occurs to me now though that this Revival might be my hardest one yet. How am I supposed to do this without breaking down?

Get it together. This is your most important Revival. Stick to the script.

“Hello. Do you know where you are?”

Tata frowns. I can see the gears shifting in his mind. He looks around our ‘living room’, brows pulled together. *Urgh, would he even recognise this pixelated piece of crap?* While Memory Triggers guide the Returners towards remembering, Incubators are soul-grounding spaces that anchor the Returners during their Revivals. The quality of the Incubators, though, depends on how much Sponsors can afford. *How the hell does it make sense that I have Revived CEOs and political leaders in state-of-the-art 32K Incubators and all I can afford for Tata is this Level 1 180p space?*

“Are we in our living room?”

Yes! "That's right. Do you know your name?"

He does and I waste no time in asking if he knows who I am. *Is he going to think I'm Amma? I do look more like her now.*

“Of course, I remember my granddaughter.” He smiles. *He smiles!*

"Okay, next! Do you recognise the song that’s playing?”

Again, he answers without hesitation. “*Nilavae Vaa.*”

“Great! What’s the last memory you have?” I hold my breath. Returners with traumatic deaths tend to struggle with this one.

“I...I don't...” His smile falters and he looks at me like a five-year-old who just found his mother again in a crowded shopping mall.

“That’s okay.” I rush to take his hand. “It’s okay. Let's look at an old memory or two. Look right over there.”

Across the room, a wide-screen television crackles to life. Time for the Memory Replay. Next to me, Tata gasps at the sight of his younger self on screen. As much as I resent how even the standard-issue Memory Replay Screens have a higher resolution than this Incubator, I appreciate how a much younger Memory Tata does look particularly vibrant on screen. We watch him as he sits at the dining table, listening to *Nilaavae Vaa* on the radio. He is humming along to the song, joining S. P. B. in the chorus.

"Tata!" a voice chimes. My seven-year-old self, dressed in my primary school uniform, bounces into the kitchen and clammers onto the chair next to his.

"Ennaalum un...ponvaanam naan..." he sings, gesturing at the cup of hot Milo and biscuits on the table. "Come, have your breakfast."

"What does that mean?" the child asks.

"Your break- Oh! The song? Mmm, it means he is someone's sky and she is his moon. You know, like how your family is your sky."

"In the sky??" She squints, then adds, in a whisper, "Is it because you're all going to die??"

"No!" He waves away the eventuality like a magic spell that the child believes in. "It means we will keep you safe, like how the sky keeps the moon safe."

"Oh!"

Memory Tata chuckles. "Okay, faster eat." His eyes light up with mischief. "Want to get some ice-cream from McDonald's quickly? Before your school bus comes?"

Instead of squealing with delight as she usually would, the child declares with clenched fists, a determined stare and biscuit crumbs on her face, "Tata, you can be the moon and I will be your sky too. I promise, I will protect you forever."

As Memory Tata and his granddaughter link their pinky fingers, the scene transforms, bringing us to the second and last Memory in today's Replay. Once again seated at the dining table, an older Memory Tata reads his copy of the *Today* newspaper, with *Nilaavae Vaa* on loop in the background. *See, be used to listen to it all the time.*

As he flips through the pages, he glances up at the wooden door across the hallway. The lines on his face are tinged with worry. When the door finally swings open, Memory Tata leaps to his feet and rushes towards his surly granddaughter, the seventeen-year old version of me.

Ah, just look at the lazy piece of shit that I was. Urgh, here we go. My worst memory.

Memory Tata follows the teenager into the kitchen. "You woke up late again."

The teenager bristles and pours herself a cup of water. "Wait, there's no food ah, Tata? You never buy lunch for me when you went out earlier?"

"I didn't know what time you were going to wake up so I only bought one packet for myself. Come, don't be angry. I go buy for you now. Should the sky buy chicken rice for the moon?" He nods towards the radio with a chuckle.

"Huh? What moon?" She continues, oblivious to how her words just yanked the grin off his face. "Aiyah, I'm not angry lah. It's fine.. I'm going to go back to bed. Tired."

Oh god, did we really need high definition AND surround sound for this, though?

The teenager trudges back to her room. Memory Tata watches her retreating back, tapping his finger on the kitchen counter, deep in thought. Seconds later, he disappears into his room and reemerges in pants instead of the sarong he usually wears at home. He knocks lightly on her door.

"I'm going to go buy some chicken rice for you! I'll be back soon."

He waits for her to answer. He receives none, of course. Eventually, he leaves the house, though not before switching off the radio.

It was only while sifting through Memories for the Replay that I realised Tata had cut S. P. B. off, after the line: *Ennai neethan pirinthaalum ninaivaalae anaiththaenae*. How apt. During our separation, the embrace of our shared memories kept me going.. I stitched each memory into a cloak that I never allowed myself to remove. How could I? By the time I had woken up from my nap that day, my Tata, the moon I had promised to protect, had been crushed under the wheels of a two-ton truck. All because I was too goddamn lazy.

I jab the remote control towards the television and the Memory Replay freezes on Memory Tata's smiling face. For a while, we are shrouded in silence as I struggle to keep my tears at bay. It strikes me that, once again, Tata is waiting for me to speak. *I'm a Reviver. Get it together.*

"Do you remember what happens after this?" I look up but I cannot seem to look him in the eye.

More alert and closer to the Tata I remember, he squeezes my hand as he answers, "I died that day."

"You did." I take a deep breath and look right at him, properly this time. "But it's okay. You won't be dead for much longer."

"What?"

"I'm Reviving you!" I laugh as my twenty-year-old shackles of guilt loosen, ever so slightly, and I make the mistake of deviating from my Revival script. "I don't know if you remember this but there was a company that was working with the government to harvest and preserve human souls to bring them back to life? Your soul was preserved too and—"

"Ennathu? How? I didn't give my permission."

"No, it's like how we have opt-out organ donation. Soul preservation is a free service for everyone." Tata starts to back away from me, panicked. "Tata, it's okay. It's not scary. You know, this is my job too! I'm a Reviver; I bring people back. The pay is good and I've finally saved enough to Sponsor your Revival. I'm bringing you back, Tata!"

"How?" Arms folded, Tata cocks his head to the side. "Why?"

Not gonna lie, it's been a while since I've encountered this level of Resistance. Best to keep Nilaavae Vaa playing throughout, if he's going to be this agitated. I guess that's what the script is for. Be his Reviver, damn it. Not his granddaughter.

Summoning some semblance of composure, I continue. "I understand it must sound strange. But I assure you, this is a safe process. You will be absolutely fine. Your original body is gone so your soul will be placed into a Receptacle. Based on the subscription plan that your family

mem – that I - have chosen for you, you will be able to live a new life in your Receptacle for thirty more years! Once you sign the consent forms, your Receptacle's current inhabitant will be eliminated forever. After which, our Technicians will alter the Receptacle to look exactly like you. Isn't that great? After you sign some forms, you're going to get your life back."

He purses his lips together, the way he used while scrutinising which vegetables were fresh at NTUC. "So the Receptacle is a body? But what's going to be eliminated?"

"Great question. It is a body but it's not a new body. It's a 100% natural and organic human body. So we will remove the body's current occupant and you can occupy the Receptacle and make it your own, Tata."

"The body's current occupant?? So, someone will die? Because of me?"

First time anyone's ever asked me that, damn. "It's not because of you. This is a perfectly legal transaction, Tata. It's been approved by the Health Sciences Authority. The Receptacle has signed all the relevant forms too. This is their choice. Besides, their families will be paid. Handsomely, too."

"Enna ma? So, you are paying to bring me back but someone else is being paid to die? Is this the right thing to do?"

I sigh. "Tata, we don't really need to discuss ethics or morals here. You just need to consent, sign the papers and you can go home. Plus, not everyone gets to Return. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Do you think the other Returners, the rich CEOs and politicians, care about the Receptacles? No. They don't. Some of them even hire their own Receptacles before they die! Are the Receptacles desperate? Sure. Do I care? No, I don't have time to. Life is about making choices and Receptacles make theirs, just like everyone else. All you have to do is choose to Return and I'll Revive you. Like I said, this is my job. I'll make sure you'll be okay."

Tata remains silent. He has regained his composure but his expression is entirely unreadable. I try to quell the waves of anxiety sloshing around at the pit of my stomach, doing my best to focus on S.P.B.'s singing as *Nilaavae Vaa* continues to echo around the Incubator. After what feels like an eternity, Tata moves to speak.

"When did you become so selfish?"

The words slice through whatever is left of my composure.

"Selfish? How can you say that? Do you know how hard I've worked so I can bring you back. Sure, it was an accident but it was so obviously my fault. Everyone else thought so! People online told me to kill myself. Amma never said it but I knew she blamed me for everything. I still see it in her eyes, sometimes!"

Tata looks like he is about to say something but in the brief silence, the carnatic riffs of *Nilavaae Vaa* start up again, and this time, I simply do not have the energy to keep it together anymore.

"Do you know that I can never listen to this song in full without breaking down? I hate this song. I hate this song so much but I listen to it almost every day because I know how horrible I was. I know I was selfish back then. I know how much I let you down by breaking our promise to protect each other. But I'm not like that anymore.. Working here hasn't been easy for me either. Some of the rich asshole Returners try stupid shit with me even as I'm bringing them back to life. Some people didn't want me Reviving them because I'm Indian! But I never complained. I never slacked off. I don't even take MCs. I worked through everything. I wasn't lazy. I never let myself be lazy ever again because I-"

My knees buckle and I crumble to the ground as years of guilt, hurt and shame reverberate throughout the Incubator in cracking sobs that eclipse S.P.B.'s crooning and sound horrifyingly like laughter. I feel Tata's hands around my shoulder.

"Everything is okay," he whispers. He says he will do it. He will come back to life. He will come back home and we can go get the one dollar ice-cream from McDonald's like we used to. I sob even harder, stitching his words into my cloak of memories while constrained in new cuffs of guilt.

I try not to think about the things I have not told him. I do not tell him the vanilla cone now costs four dollars. I do not tell him that I have also paid for his housing and his rehabilitative therapy. I do not tell him that a significant portion of his therapy sessions, like my own sessions that I attended after his death, will deal with how a loved one died while helping him. I do not tell him that part of his expenses will be covered with the lump sum that will be deposited into his account

once this Revival is over. Most of all, I do not tell him that this is my final Revival because I am his Receptacle.

**If You Asked Her How Long It Took To Drive From Bukit Purmei
To Woodlands On A Sunday Evening, She'll Tell You It Takes Exactly
Half The Veer-Zaara Soundtrack**

Kiran Kaur Dhaliwal

grimy and lethargic from the day's shenanigans
she takes her coveted seat on a weathered leathered throne
befitting a mini princess — her father's moniker
matches her mother's sartorial choices of
barbie-accented gear from john little
so when she sees a pretty preity on screen as zaara
she too thinks that she's a *marzi ki mallika*
lataji's lullaby-like crooning forms part of her origin story
sheltered, pampered,
non-threateningly determined,
acceptably feminine

as the vehicle enters AYE, she assumes a foetal position
letting lataji gradually carry her into partial slumber
before passing her on to gurdas maan
he shares her mother's maternal surname and sings
of a land he never names but makes sure she still remembers
the lines of beloved punjabi folk gaane
srk as veer on a tractor brings tears to her mother's eyes
aisa des hai mera
as if addressing her child of diaspora directly:

“look this is my mitti,
a thick wedge of my heart
the taste of rotis on a chulha
searing in the courtyard
makeshift swings the sign of merriment
or innocence breaking into
adolescence, i can't quite tell”

it might look the same but there is a gulf between sugarcane
chewed raw and the pale green dilution in a plastic cup from lau pa sat

crossing from PIE onto BKE, the soft turns
are invisible contours of an embrace, the makings of a nap
she hears again, lataji leading the way for a crescendo

it is in this song that she hears her name,
brown enough
and never on those mass-produced trinkets
longing, stirring in her a very primal want
she once saw a car almost crash into the road partitioned
because it changed lanes too late
she wonders if zaara and veer might miss their trains
if she presses the rewind button,
will they start walking back to each other?

at the Woodlands Ave 2 exit, the tires wind tightly
screaming over asphalt and concrete —
a loop that pushes her weight
all the way to her toes,
returning to routine, far from that compacted world
where desire bows down at the feet of ascetics
where love is the only worthy thing after peace
where grief is the worship of love
its own religion

she does not understand why srk wears a chain
with the *khanda* when his last name is *khan*
and why it takes only a nose ring to become pakistani or that
loss sometimes echoes in the sonorous sounds of silver anklets separated
there are man-made rules and social mores stitched
over a late composer's previously unused recordings
nostalgia has a price like every other item on the market
for exactly twenty-two unnecessary years of pining, you get twenty-two more

Queer at the Bollywood Club

Mrigaa Sethi

The great chink in my dashing butch armor is that I don't dance. On the increasingly rare occasion that I find myself on a dance floor – be it EDM, hip-hop or Top 40, I panic. I flail obligingly to the music for about 30 seconds before the inevitable thought overrides all systems: What am I doing with my legs? What am I doing with my arms? What am I doing with my face? Are these people having as much fun as they look like they are?

At parties, weddings and clubs, I cast furtive glances at my less miserable friends, quickly observing what they are doing with their feet or their hands. Then I do that for a while until it's painfully obvious that I'm doing the same thing over and over again. But most of the time, my women friends are doing some funky thing with their hips, some half-twerk-half-dip, some crossing of the wrists that I can't bring myself to do. There are rarely any men around, and if there are, they're not worthy of emulation.

If one of my arms is occupied by a beer bottle, the anxiety can be kept at bay until the last of the beer is drained – taking swigs being one of my chief dance moves – but eventually, I excuse myself mid-song and stride to the exit to chat up the smokers until it's time to buy another beer and endure it again.

The one exception to this rule is Bollywood and bhangra. At the electric bow-chic-a-wow-wow of 1982's "I am a Disco Dancer", Amitabh's unmistakable baritone at the opening of "Rang Barse", the first keys of Yo Yo Honey Singh's "Aaj Blue Hai Pani Pani", I cannot help but storm the dance floor, point my index fingers in the air and shrug and shimmy my shoulders for a respectable period of time, the old friendship between this music and my body drowning out my self-consciousness. If she is present for the occasion – at an Indian wedding, for example – my mother beams with affection and, if my dance moves are accompanied by a dashing sherwani, as they often are at Indian weddings, she removes the evil eye by adoringly bringing her fingers to my temples and rotating her wrists like a pious Bollywood mother.

Having lived the majority of my life in cities I wasn't born in, such nights are rare, involving a flight to Delhi, Bombay or Bangkok. The rest of the time, my dancing spirit lies dormant for months, years at a stretch, not even anticipating its next encounter with the one animating force that will suddenly find it, grip it and raise it from the dead.

Unless, of course, I'm at a Bollywood dance club, that peculiar breed of nightlife venue that can be found everywhere from Singapore to New York City, where everyone from college students to McKinsey consultants and migrant workers unite in their shared need to mouth the lyrics to "Dum Maro Dum", anthem of rebels and outcasts, and those who wished they were.

One such night in 2008, I found myself at an edition of Basement Bhangra, a legendary Bollywood night that ran for years in Lower Manhattan, ironically across the street from the immigration detention centre. I was a graduate student at the time, there with two white women, one of them my lover.

It's a strange thing to be queer at a Bollywood club. Standing in what is effectively the cultural embassy of the motherland, my queerness is erased. To my fellow brown college students, McKinsey consultants and migrant workers that night, two women dancing with each other to Panjabi MC's "Beware of the Boys", even when one of them is a boot-wearing badass dyke with super-short, inky-black waves, just didn't read as queer. For the painful hour we stayed, we spurned the overtures from my fellow Indians by shouting "She's with me! She's with me!" over the music.

All the while, some of our other fellow Indians across the street waited to be deported at the immigration detention centre. Less than a year later, I too was ejected from the United States, landing back in the realm of uncle-auntie parties that did not acknowledge the truths that I was too chicken-shit to impose upon them. This was the autumn of 2009, just a couple of months after Delhi High Court struck down Section 377 of the penal code decriminalizing homosexuality. Four years later, the Indian Supreme Court overruled that decision and reinstated the ban on gay sex. Three months after that, I moved to Singapore, where the same colonial-era law is also alive and well.

Until the pandemic, at the end of Singapore's Haji Lane and across Beach Road sat the Bollywood dance club known as Magic Carpet. It was a reasonable \$20 to get in, and by 11pm, the floor would be packed with groups of Indian men and women, some as old as my mom and dad, dressed for a night out in pleated trousers, bling watches, shiny black dresses and impressive heels. There was a smoke machine, bottle service, a hit list of bhangra that got everyone excited and remixes of old Bollywood classes that I know all the lyrics to. Like any Bollywood club I've been to, it was also one of the straightest places in the world. But checking my queerness at the door was the price I paid a couple times a year to immerse myself in the music my body, no matter the length of its hair, the dykiness of its boots, knows in its bones.

But in September 2018, towards the end of my fifth year in Singapore, a series of wonderful things happened. First, on September 6, the Supreme Court of India declared Article 377 “irrational, indefensible and manifestly arbitrary” and I surprised myself by falling to pieces at my place of work in Changi Business Park, that bastion of Indian tech and consultancy companies rudely nicknamed Changelore Business Park. I haven’t lived in India since I was nine, and I didn’t think I cared. But for the next few days, I watched the faces of my kith, in the elevators, the pathways, the lunch spots and the MRT platforms, and wondered if they had heard the biggest news story out of India that week. Was it the first time they had had to reckon with the very existence of Indian queers? Did they finally realize that I was one?

The second wonderful thing was that, a few days later, my gorgeous American lover, who loves to dance, and I, after a long and occasionally fraught 22 months of long distance, were united when she moved across the world to Singapore. We were in disbelief at our luck, our perseverance and each other’s presence.

And thirdly, a couple of weeks after that, we went to Magic Carpet Bollywood Dance Club for what turned out to be a fucking legendary night. It quickly became packed to the gills with uncles and aunties, brothers and sisters, both familiar and strange. And in a cocoon of bodies and neon-washed smoke, my darling and I danced very close, smiled and kissed to all my favorite songs. In the morning, my darling told me that an auntie across the floor had smiled at her, then pointed to the both of us, as if asking if we were together. When my darling nodded yes, the auntie smiled and gave her a thumbs-up.

That night at the club, as my kith shared the dance floor with us, I understood the power of repealing 377. For the first time, in my own mind, I was Indian and queer at the same time.

Actually, a fourth wonderful thing happened. I saw a short-haired, badass Indian dyke enter the club with her non-Indian girlfriend. She was a good 10 or 15 years younger than me, and I was delighted to see that as she danced, with abandon, she was mouthing the lyrics to all the old classics. Like me, she knew them all. As I left the club, I went over to her and without a word extended my fingers to her temples and removed the evil eye.

She smiled hard and said, “Thank you! Thank you so much.”

Urvasi Urvasi

Pooja Nansi

There's an old Beatles lyric about taking a song and making it better / but some things / are already
perfection / Yo Yo Honey Singh didn't get the memo / the way he says Urvasi / positively
Caucasian / then will.i.am's American twang butchering the name / these remixes / what feels like /
the world's worst lyrics / can we *please* / take it back to 1994 / Kadhalan / where this 90s Brown kid
psalm / starts rightfully / with a prayer call / the sweetest suspense syncopation / and don't even
get me started / on Prabhu Deva / dancing like he has no bones in his body / even in grey dad
pleated pants / all hips / all sex / pure poetry / take it easy policy / moving like blood set free / his
body / a fantasy / has there ever been anything we felt more primal / in our pulse / than these
beats / this song / a fucking gift of confidence / the kind of swag / you cannot teach.

Contributors

Laili Abdeen



Laili is a writer who embraces the multiplicity within herself and those around her. She writes to seek out yet another version of herself in the world but also hopes that it inspires others to search for themselves. She is a poet finding peace in constant chaos.

Sarah Farheenshah Begum



Sarah writes from the middle of a North-South Indian magnet. With her experiences of multiple conflicting and overlapping parts of what she sees and feels, she writes for herself, her past selves, and the way her future imagines itself, whether continuous or in pause.

Kiran Kaur Dhaliwal



Kiran is an aspiring Singaporean-Sikh poet. An alumna of REWRITE London, a creative writing collective, she is currently working on a poetry-memoir hybrid. When not mulling over words, she can be found holding one-woman concerts in her room or sleeping.

Ranjini Ganapathy



Ranjini is a Brisbane-based creative arts educator and dance writer who marries her twin passions of languages and dance in almost all that she does. She is also Amma to a toddler who insists she shares her stash of chocolate with her at all times of the day.

Subash Kumar



If he is not facing an existential crisis, Subash cooks, bakes and writes-ish. He is currently pursuing a career in food while taking a degree in literature. He hopes to reach a point someday where he would be able to articulate the complexities of all that he sees and feels.

Pooja Nansi



Pooja's latest and third collection of poetry *We Make Spaces Divine* was published in January 2021. She is the co-founder of Other Tongues, a literary festival of minority voices and the current festival director of the Singapore Writers Festival.

Gayathrii Nathan



Gayathrii is an educator and researcher. Her research interests lie in the intersection of education, culture and media. She consumes Kdrama for breakfast, lunch and dinner on a daily basis and runs a Kdrama [newsletter](#) focusing on OTPs (One True Pairs, not One True Passwords).

Mrigaa Sethi



Mrigaa is a poet, writer and storyteller living in Singapore. Her poems have appeared in *The Seneca Review*, *ep:phany* and other literary magazines, and have been anthologised in *Call and Response 2* and *EXHALE: an Anthology of Queer Singapore Voices* both by Math Paper Press. She is also a storyteller, and has performed original work at Other Tongues: A Festival of Minority Voices, the Singapore Night Festival, StoryFest and What's Your Story Slam. Most recently, she hosted a four-part podcast on mysticism, *No Magic Here*, as part of the Singapore Writers Festival.