

mahogany

Issue 2 : Retellings



Edited by Prasanthi Ram & Jaryl George Solomon



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Editor's Note (Poetry)

Jaryl George Solomon

“These stories we (re)tell”

The very essence of our human connection lies in storytelling. Before you and me, our ancestors sat around the amber glow of flames, reciting narratives that spanned across the heroic and the supernatural. Their tales tried to make sense of their world—explaining phenomena as furious gods striking each other down in the distant skies above, warning children of disembodied cackles that pierce the twilight sky, celebrating the prowess of the human spirit over seemingly insurmountable hurdles. Even in the present, we tell stories over and over again (some might say, in an endless loop) hoping to glean new meaning from supposedly stale characters or plots that might not necessarily sit well with today's audiences.

Contemporary readers would have come across many versions of a singular story, till the point where its origin becomes murky and even indistinguishable. Currently, there are more than 300 iterations of Snow White alone, retold in multitudes. Yet, that has not stopped writers from pursuing their own versions of such familiar narratives. Why do we then keep returning to these tales that have taken root in our consciousness and culture, time and time again? Perhaps, the impetus lies in updating these stories for a modern audience? Or maybe, reframing such stories allow certain absent perspectives to come back from erasure? At the heart of it all, retelling folklores, legends and myths might allow us to gain epiphanies about ourselves.

That was how I felt as I perused the six selected poems for this issue. Each of them sought a way to position the personal amidst the vastness of the worlds originally created for these retold stories. In Tessa Kaur's "Kesh", the age-old tale of Rapunzel is spun into an exploration of the disconnection and chasm that can exist between one and her culture. In "Love *Lores*" by Kiran Kaur Dhaliwal, illustrious Punjabi tragic romances remind us that nothing really has changed in the acts of contemporary courtship, the rituals we partake in to find some semblance of love is still equally tragic, if not more. With Akash Mattupalli's "Ganesh Chaturthi", a familiar Hindu custom becomes the setting for one to see the overlaps between his life and the god he worships. In a similar vein, S

Shivaane unearths the parallels between a South Asian woman and the heroism that Kannagi embodies in her piece, “How many Kannagis must burn?”. Befitting a Halloween release date, Sarah Farheenshah Begum’s piece “Witch to-be” questions the warnings women receive regarding a popular but fabled long-haired spiritual entity. Finally, in Pratyusha Mukherjee’s “Red”, we see how folklores, legends and myths can intertwine into a reading experience that embodies how stories function intertextually these days.

Though daunting at first, I have come to appreciate the editing task I had to take on for this issue. It has opened my eyes to the many approaches our poets have adopted in reframing these classic narratives to fit the objective of this journal, being a showcase of +65 South Asian literary voices. In fact, that was the springboard I needed to plunge into my own retelling of a popular Southeast Asian legend as I borrowed elements from a ghostly tale to make sense of my own issues with my body. I am sure many of you know this by now, but there is a special kind of catharsis that one experiences when they are brave enough to confront what burdens them through the written word. It just so happens that my horror inclinations assisted me with that.

At the end of it all, as you find yourself reading our second issue amidst a much different kind of glow, you will come to appreciate the basal need for us writers to keep telling and retelling stories. Though often perceived as an endless loop, I hope the pieces we have selected challenge you to rethink the nature of such narratives. I would like to see our storytelling traditions akin to an ouroboros, we tell and retell stories to preserve them, in some form of continuity with hopes that these stories can endure and even outlast us. For now and forever, even when you and I are long gone, these stories we (re)tell will remain.

With gratitude and hope,

Jaryl

Chaser

Jaryl George Solomon

here we are, clothes not on the floor yet,
i say yes because you covet
shameless parts other boys find monstrous
clumsily fingering my buttons
hair creeps out like a dense hungry jungle
a joke rustles out of you
something about a bra trapping my flesh
you need to remember
tales of demons prowling after twilight
to suckle lost men
please never remind me of those who once
arrowed hands into beaks
to pick at my plump chest, voracious enough
to dig deep, reaching bone
or the chinese recruits who hosed me down
calling me a shit-stained cow
i pull you in closer to nurse or shut you up
it's hard to tell in the dark
my body offers you supernatural worlds
away from your wife and child
you find guys like me weekly to play pretend
gaze at the way my skin striates
how my hair curls like the jungle witch's nails
men like you are selfish
i detest you but you are in love with my breasts
barely seeing, your hands trail
the ridges and folds of my body, the braille
for your blind faith, you trust
that i will be gentle as you open your mouth
to take my seed in gulps
my body contorts and envelopes you in
your head is swaddled
till all i hear is the sound of falling trees
this is the punishment,
you are the warning to all the other chasers:
when you strip the fat
off my body, underneath is still muscle.

Editor's Note (Fiction)

Prasanthi Ram

“Our Anchors, Our Home”

The year trails on, besmirched by a continued sense of uncertainty and grief. If we are all boats at sea, then this pandemic has stolen our anchors. It is too easy to feel stranded in today's world; it is as if we have been forsaken and some deity above is simply waiting for clearance to re-run this experiment gone wrong (yes, I *am* convinced we are in The Bad Place). I too have struggled this year in the tempestuous ocean of life, which is why it is an immense relief to be able to return to the safe space that is Mahogany. Even if it is just our second issue, Mahogany feels like home, where I am nourished and get to nourish. What a privilege it is, to belong to a place that waits patiently for you to return from finding your footing out in the world.

For this issue, we narrow in on the tales that have anchored cultures and peoples with a sense of meaning. Together, we contemplate how they, and the messages contained within them, can be retold for our contemporary +65 South Asian context. Out of the nine selected works, three are short stories.

With Anittha Thanabalan's "The House of Wind", we have a refashioned children's folktale, set in the recognisably Singaporean wet market, that explores the relationship between status and shame, as well as deserving and greed. Then we have Gayatri Balasubramanian's "The Conundrum of Ardhanarishvar", which foregrounds the inherent queerness of Hindu mythology in a heartrending story about a strained mother-child relationship and their shared love for the androgynous Ardhanarishvar. Lastly, we have Shanthini Selvarajan's "Kelly" that takes on the horror genre, except that the horror in question is none other than self-obsessed male misogynists one meets through dating apps (Goddess Kali would probably agree with Kelly).

Given the intertextuality of these works, I thoroughly enjoyed the editing process because there was simply so much to learn and reconsider. Every folktale, legend and myth naturally comes with its own identifiers and nuances. It was therefore thrilling to observe how each writer reconceptualised those particularities in their own styles and narrativised them with messages that are both familiar

and relevant to our community today. Even when working on my own creative response, I found myself fixating on the helplessness of human beings in the face of divine powers, which led me to question why the seeming ruthlessness of godly figures has often been downplayed, even normalised in several myths. I was curious to find out what it would take for the ruthlessness to finally be seen as problematic. The answer then came to me in the form of a hypothetical question: “What if a similar narrative unfolded during a worldwide pandemic?” Indeed, the overall experience of putting together *Retellings* has made me realise that South Asianness is a boundless continuum that can benefit greatly from such retellings—in fact, it demands to be renewed and replenished along with shifting times.

This issue too is a gift from us to you. If even a single word or phrase from the following pages feeds your imagination and anchors you better in this volatile world, we will consider it the greatest compliment. And to our +65 South Asian readers, welcome home.

Sending love and light,

Prasanthi

Across the Causeway

Prasanthi Ram

In the head of a red snapper imported from Johor lay a silver ring.

It was nothing spectacular to write home about. In fact, it resembled the tab of a canned soft drink—thin and slightly misshapen, bereft of the handiwork of a skilled jeweller. Srija, who had discovered the strange object while cutting into the curried fish head, paused in surprise albeit at herself. Why was her first thought not to call the manager of the restaurant and demand immediately for a refund? After all, this was her first lunch out in daylight after a long time of home quarantine; she had all the right to be outraged. Why instead was she overwhelmed by an inexplicable urge to press her face into her hands and weep till night arrived?

When the extremely flustered manager tried to assure her, behind a mask, that such a mishap was rare in his reputed TripAdvisor-approved restaurant, she simply asked that she could keep the ring: "Don't worry. I am not asking for it so that I can report you to the authorities. I just thought that the ring must have been meant for me. I believe in things like destiny, you see," she half-joked. Bewildered by the turn of events but oddly relieved by what he assumed was her naivety, he swiftly issued her a cash refund, passed her the ring, which was rinsed and tucked into a small takeaway box meant for chutneys, and pleaded for her silence in return.

From the restaurant all the way to the doorstep of her flat, the inexplicable urge swelled until it began to constrict her throat. But she was a stoic woman; she held it in, not succumbing. It was only in the night, when her mind descended into the fog of her dreams that she finally let go. A man's face emerged. He was drenched, as if he had gone for a deep dive; his hair was dripping and matted against his forehead. But he had a smile that immediately disarmed her. All he said was her name, repeatedly: "Srija, Srija, Srija." The next morning, she remembered, as if unearthing a lifetime from the depths of her consciousness, his name. It was Hussein.

The troubling thing was, she knew Hussein. Too well. She knew everything about him when she had no recollection of him just the night before. The way he liked his morning coffee—kopi-o, black with a pinch of white sugar. The way his fingertips were rough, sometimes blistered, from playing the guitar to vent his emotions after a shitty day at work (he was a technician). The way he left dishes in the sink permanently because putting them away only to use them again made absolutely no sense to him; he sometimes even ate over the sink. The way he loved to read Arabic poetry and would translate them into English for her to understand. The way he kissed her against

the shell of her ear as she fell asleep in his arms but hated it when anyone, even she, touched his ears. The way he had fought with his parents to be with a Hindu woman he fell in love with online. The way he moved against their wishes to Johor, to be closer to her, with only the border separating them. The way he left no trace of himself in her apartment and vice versa because they had moved in and out of each other's in travel bags. They had been lovers who rode cross-country buses to see each other, and yet.

Srija reached for the takeaway box on her bedside table and ripped the lid open. Since the ring was no longer covered in cooked flesh and spiced sauce, it seemed different. Delicate, even. Only misshapen because it, she now remembered, had been her own handiwork at a workshop in a small metalsmithing studio; she had the idea of making a gift for Hussein who himself was good with his hands. The result was a silver band for his ring finger, with their initials “H & S” engraved in unsteady cursive on the inside. An ornament full of promise that tethered her to him across the causeway. Srija traced over the letters, troubled.

How in the world had the ring ended up in a bowl of fish head curry served to her at a restaurant along Race Course Road? More importantly, where was Hussein now?

Miles from the other side of the border was Hussein, in his first-floor home that had been dishevelled by a flood. For weeks now, he had been searching. When the waters first hit his doorstep, he was too taken aback despite the government's warnings to evacuate earlier. For he had been daydreaming, about her. The woman who seemed to have forgotten him from the distance between them. The woman who no longer called or picked up because her number was suddenly different. Before he could register the catastrophe before him, the front door was compromised, bottom half soaked through, and the silver on his ring finger was lost upon impact to floors he could no longer see.

Eventually, the murky waters receded. But the ring—the only thing he had from her—was gone. That realisation was what eviscerated the last threads of his will. It felt as if the mighty causeway itself was being demolished before his eyes.

At the same time, somewhere between the worlds of humans and devas, a sage was sitting under the leafy canopy of a banyan tree. He had migrated to the sacred bahupada immediately after sending the red snapper from Johor to Singapore. There, he hoped to seek forgiveness from the gods by meditating.

Like Hussein, there was once a woman centuries ago, if one believed (like humans did) that time travelled linearly. She spent days pining deeply for her lover until she failed to hear the sage one day at her doorstep asking for water. In anger, he cursed her, that the one she thought of so dearly would forget her. At her immediate suffering, the sage had felt vindicated. Happy even.

But with Hussein, the bliss was short-lived. The sage had lashed out the same curse at the young man for not heeding his request for clean water to drink. But he soon realised—as he travelled through the rest of the country—that he had made a mistake. Once again, after years of atonement, he had allowed his temper to be misplaced in a split second. If he had better self-restraint, as a man of his station should, he would have sooner realised that Hussein could not have come to the doorstep either way, lovesick or not.

It was true that he had been pining after a woman so much so that he had lost consideration for the world around him. But it was understandable, for the pair had been separated against their will. A stealthy disease was in its midst of ravaging their lands, forcing them to be on opposite sides of the border, sequestered. The boy was not even permitted to leave his house or speak to anyone from the outside. Disturbed by his realisations, the sage had spiralled: “Will it not be a sin then to leave the two lovers cursed for eternity? How has it only now occurred to me, after epochs of prayer, that perhaps no human being deserves to bear my moment’s wrath for the rest of their brief lifetime? What good is all this wisdom I have accumulated if I only wield it against the helpless?”

Ashamed of his own hastiness, the sage had sought to undo his own formidable words. He conjured a snapper, slid Hussein's beloved silver ring painlessly into its head, and directed it to lay before Hussein's lover: "Bring the truth of Hussein to her."

A banyan leaf lightly landed on the sage’s lap, disrupting his meditation. It was then that he knew that Hussein’s house was no longer a home. Overwhelmed by guilt, he fled from the tree to another place and time.

When Hussein's body turned cold on the floor of his waterlogged apartment, it took until the next sunset before a neighbour noticed the smell enough to call the police. The investigations showed no signs of drowning or foul play. But they found, post-mortem, that he had indeed contracted the disease and claimed that it could have been a possible cause of death. In the end, just another body to the numbers. They had too many others to find and document anyway; his family up in Perak had already been informed and hence, he was no longer their problem. But to the south of Johor, as the dead snapper eroded in her stomach until all that remained was truth, Srija began to weep at last.

GOD/DESS MAHOGANY'S CATALOGUE OF FOLKLORES, LEGENDS & MYTHS

Ardhanarishvar

in "The Conundrum of Ardhanarishvar" by Gayatri Balasubramanian

Considered as one of the incarnations of Shiva, Ardhanarishvar is the composite form of the god and his consort Parvati. As such, the right half of the deity's body is depicted as male (Shiva) and the left half, female (Parvati). Ardhanarishvar is regarded as the manifestation of a delicate and harmonious balance between the masculine and feminine. In one myth, Parvati wished to be inseparable from her husband. So Shiva shed half of himself and brought her into him, thus birthing his androgynous form. This is reflected in the very name of the deity that is derived from three Sanskrit words: ardhha meaning half, naari meaning female or Parvati, and ishwara meaning Shiva.



Bukit Merah

in "Red" by Pratyusha Mukherjee



Singapore's Bukit Merah stands for "red hill" in Malay. The legend behind this unique moniker starts with a clever little boy. It is said that the waters around Singapore used to be infested with ferocious swordfish that terrified villagers. It was the boy who thought of using banana tree trunks to build a protective wall along the shore. He presented his ingenious idea to the Sultan who then put his plan to action. The wall eventually worked because the bills of the swordfish that swam close to the shore got trapped in the trunks, making it easier for the army to get rid of them. The Sultan however was jealous of the boy's steep rise to fame in the village. Hence, he ordered assassins to kill the child atop a hill. As legend has it, his blood flowed down the hill and painted it red.

Chudail

in *“Witch to-be”* by Sarah Farbeenshab Begum



The Chudail is a mythic witch in South Asian folklore who is said to have died from abuse or childbirth. They are often depicted with long hair and their feet backwards, and are said to attack their past abusers or young men in general. Similar to the Pontianak in Southeast Asian folklore, a malicious spirit of a woman who died during childbirth, the Chudail too is presented as a frightening woman who must be avoided at all costs. In feminist readings, the two parallel figures embody the monstrous feminine and have been interpreted as patriarchal ideations.

Ganesh

in *“Ganesh Chaturthi”* by Akash Mattupalli

Lord Ganesh is the God of Beginnings and Remover of Obstacles in Hinduism. According to mythology, he first came into existence when his lonely mother Parvati created him out of clay. One day when Parvati wanted to go to the river for a bath, she instructed her son to guard their home from any trespassers. Even when Shiva returned, Ganesh, not knowing that it was his father, stopped the god from entering his own house. In a moment's rage, Shiva beheaded Ganesh. It was only when Parvati returned and cried at the sight of her headless son that Shiva realised what he had done. To make amends, Shiva took the head of the first creature he encountered, a baby elephant, giving rise to the elephant-god we know today. It is this story of his birth that is celebrated by Hindus worldwide during Ganesh Chaturthi.



Hantu Tetek

in "Chaser" by Jaryl George Solomon

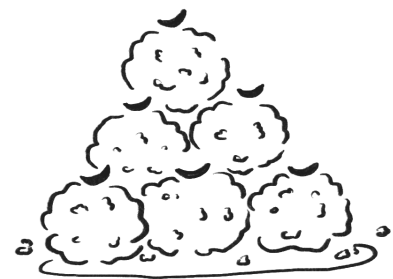


Despite its scattered origins, the folklore of the hantu tetek (or breast ghost) is commonly heard in Southeast Asian countries. Said to be a demonic spirit presenting itself as a beautiful woman, the hantu tetek's true form is that of a wrinkled, scaled or hairy grotesque being with pendulous breasts (sometimes on its back) that are used to suffocate its victims. Mainly used as a cautionary tale, the hantu tetek is said to target young children and young (virgin) men who dare to venture out during twilight.

Heer Ranjha

in "Love Lores" by Kiran Kaur Dhalival

Long before Romeo and Juliet, there were Heer and Ranjha. Popularised in the form of an epic poem by Waris Shah, the tragic romance sees Heer (an extremely ravishing young woman born into a wealthy caste) fall in love with Ranjha (a young flute-playing herder born into a lower caste). Eventually, their forbidden relationship is discovered by Heer's uncle and parents. Her parents surprisingly encourage them to get married but the lovers are unaware of a plot to kill Heer for the shame she had brought to her caste. Her uncle (along with other kinsmen) poisons the laddu fed to her during the wedding. Realising that his one true love was dead, Ranjha eats the remainder of the poisoned laddu, joining Heer in her tragic end.



Kali

in "Red" by Pratyusha Mukherjee & "Kelly" by Shanthini Selvarajan



Kali is a revered and fearsome goddess in Hinduism. An incarnation of Parvati, she is regarded as the most powerful form of Shakti, a personified understanding of cosmic energy, and is associated with ideas of death, destruction, even doomsday. In popular iconography, she is depicted with her tongue sticking out, a bloody knife in one hand, a freshly decapitated male head in another, and with a mundamala, a garland of human heads, around her neck.

Unsurprisingly, Kali is seen by contemporary believers and scholars as an empowering feminist icon.

Kannagi

in "How many Kannagis must burn?" by S Shivaane

The legend of Kannagi details the story of a Tamil woman devoted to her husband, Kovalan, despite his adulterous behaviour. They try to rebuild their marriage when Kovalan crawls back to Kannagi after being made penniless by his affair. With the hopes of regaining their wealth, Kovalan sets out to the city of Madurai to sell one of Kannagi's anklets but it gets mistaken for the queen's stolen anklet. Consequently, Kovalan is beheaded by the king for having committed this alleged crime. When Kannagi is informed of her husband's unjust execution, she sets forth to Madurai and proves his innocence, not before cursing the entire city to be engulfed by flames.





Lady Luck

in "Red" by Pratyusha Mukherjee

Lady Luck is perceived by many as the personification of fortune and wealth across various cultures. From Fortuna in Roman mythology to Lakshmi in Hinduism, many attempt to court Lady Luck to reap her benefits. In Chinese culture especially, it is believed that wearing red articles of clothing can help combat darkness and evil spirits since the colour often denotes life, hope and light.

Little Red Riding Hood

in "Red" by Pratyusha Mukherjee

Like many of the beloved modern fairy tales we know by heart, Little Red Riding Hood has a much grimmer origin. In some of the earlier versions of this familiar tale, the young girl meets many fates: in one version, she is tricked into cannibalising her own grandmother when she informs the wolf of her hunger while in another, she is gobbled up by the wolf when she gets in bed with him. Of course, in more optimistic versions, she manages to outsmart the wolf with her own cunning, reinforcing the notion that humans are the truly sly ones at the end of the day.



Rapunzel

in “Kesh” by Tessa Kaur

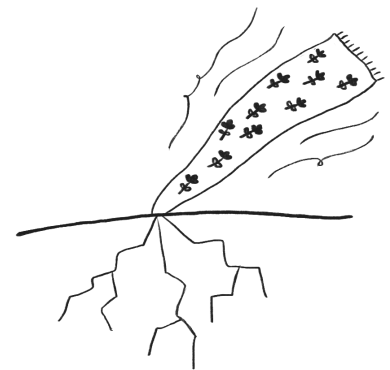


The tale of Rapunzel that we fondly know of is a German fairytale made popular by the Brothers Grimm, with roots that potentially stretch back to 11th Century literature. Though many sanitised versions have sprouted from this tale, the darker undertones of the Brothers Grimm iteration showcases sorceress Dame Gothel severing Rapunzel’s hair and exiling her once she finds out that a prince has been climbing it to reach her treasured child. When the prince calls for Rapunzel one night, Dame Gothel hauls him up with the tresses she had cut. Reeling from horror, the prince falls into a thorn bush that blinds him. However, the lovers are reunited when the prince chances upon a familiar voice singing and Rapunzel’s tears cure him of his blindness.

Sassi Punnu

in “Love Lores” by Kiran Kaur Dhalival

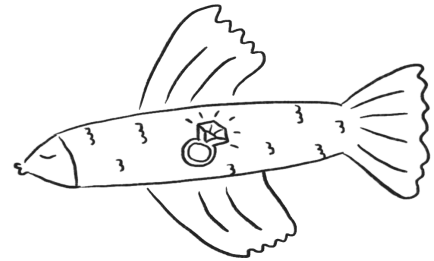
In “Sassi Punnu”, the titular characters find themselves in a union that Punnu’s father and brothers frown upon. Under the guise of wedding celebrations, his brothers force him to drink till the point of intoxication. The inebriated Punnu is then abducted and brought back to his hometown against his will, leaving Sonni grief-stricken from the separation. In order to reunite with her husband, Sonni traverses a treacherous desert where she constantly calls out Punnu’s name. Eventually, she comes across a shepherd who is so enamoured by her beauty that he tries to force himself on her. Terrified, she begs God to hide her and the ground swallows her, with only the tip of her dupatta visible. Once Punnu sobers up, he goes in search of his wife and comes across her dupatta. Heartbroken over her fate, he calls out to God to reunite them and his prayer is answered when the ground devours him too.



Shakuntala

in "Across the Causeway" by Prasanthi Ram

Depicted in the Hindu epic Mahabharata, Shakuntala is the beautiful daughter of sage Vishwamitra and apsara Menaka. Adopted later by sage Karna, she comes to reside in his hermitage within the forest. When a powerful king named Dushyanta hunts a deer within the same forest, Shakuntala asks that he nurse the injured creature to health by staying back. Soon, they fall in love and get secretly married. Dushyanta leaves, promising to bring her to his kingdom as his lawfully wedded wife. However, Shakuntala accidentally ignores an ill-tempered sage while daydreaming of her husband. The sage thus curses her, that Dushyanta will forget her unless he is shown an object that represents their love. Unfortunately, Shakuntala loses the only object she has, her ring, to the river. It is only when a fisherman discovers the ring in a fish and presents the prized ornament to the king that Dushyanta remember her again.



Sohni Mahiwal

in "Love Lores" by Kiran Kaur Dhalival



Part of the four popular tragic romances of Punjab, "Sohni Mahiwal" revolves around Sohni (a potter's daughter) falling in love with an outsider, Mahiwal. In order to quieten the commotion caused by this taboo relationship, her parents arrange her marriage to another potter from their community and she is shipped off to his home. Unhappy with her marriage, Sohni crosses a river every night on an inverted earthen pot to where her true love herds buffaloes. Unfortunately, her nightly jaunts are discovered by her in-laws who replace her pot with an unbaked one. This leads to the clay dissolving in the water when Sohni travels across the river, one night, drowning in its whirling waves. Mahiwal jumps in, in an attempt to save her, but perishes too, reuniting with Sohni at the bottom.

The House of Wind

in *“The House of Wind”* by Anittha Thanabalan

A children’s folktale, “The House of Wind” is a didactic story that warns against greed. In its original iteration, the protagonist finds herself at the House of Wind after the wind blows away one of her clothes while she was doing laundry outside. Despite being tempted with gifts of riches by the wind’s mother, she instead chooses to return with just her cloth and is hence rewarded with gold. However, when the protagonist’s jealous neighbour deliberately lands herself at the House of Wind with the hopes of similarly gaining riches, she instead is punished with a box of bricks.



The House of Wind

Anittha Thanabalan

“I hope we don’t see anyone from school,” Gita said as she counted marigolds into bunches of ten from a large wicker basket before bagging them in plastic. Gita and her best friend Ramani, whose parents owned the flower stall two lanes down, were gathered at Gita’s parents’ mutton stall, setting up for the busiest day of the week.

“Why?” Ramani asked. She was carefully spreading a turmeric-yellow cloth on the cash register in Gita’s parents’ stall, smoothing it down so there were no unsightly wrinkles. The cloth had been passed down to Gita’s father from his father. For a family of butchers, the cloth was thought to bring good fortune, clearing out each day’s stock of mutton. It was fading to white in certain patches. In the very middle, the names of Gita’s ancestors had been sewn in black thread. Several times, after the customers had thinned out, Ramani had seen Gita’s dad run his fingers over the names reverently, before touching the cloth to his lips and slipping it into its protective case.

“What why? Imagine what they would think if they saw us here?”

“That we are helpful and not lazing about playing video games?” Ramani looked up to see Gita ripping and twisting the stalks off the delicate blooms. “Hey! Careful with the stalks! You are taking off too much.”

Gita snorted like a cartoon pig in a children’s picture-book. “Video games are what *normal* teenagers do on Sundays.”

“We are normal.”

Another snort. “Please. We are fifteen, in a wet market selling flowers and mutton. With our parents. On a Sunday. Do you know what my classmates do on Sundays?”

Ramani grinned. “Laze about and play video games?”

“No,” Gita said, chucking a loose flower stalk at her. Ramani caught it deftly and threw it into a deep bin filled with mutton trimmings. “They go pray. Have a family day. Go to the beach. Visit relatives. *Sleep in.*” Gita’s eyes closed, revelling in the luxurious idea of getting to wake up just in time for lunch.

“Well, this is kind of like family day and any pictures you take here will be unique.”

“IG stories filled with slaughtered sheep are not unique, they’re weird.” Gita snorted. “I don’t think any of my classmates have even *been* to a wet market.”

“One, that’s just sad. Two, snort one more time and I’m going to ask Aunty Ling to hang you next to the rest of her pigs,” Ramani said, jerking her head at the lady who sold pork.

Gita rolled her eyes. “Anyway, work with my parents and me today, okay?”

“*Again?* My parents are starting to wonder why I’m never with them on Sundays.”

“Come on, please. Just one more day. You’re so much better at handling meat. I still want to throw up sometimes,” Gita said, wrinkling her nose.

“I don’t know...”

“Please, Ramani. You’re so helpful here! My parents are always so glad when you man the till. They even let you handle the cloth! You only help your parents with prep anyway and I’ve already done that for you.” Gita flashed pearly white teeth and batted thick dark lashes.

Ramani grabbed a marigold from the wicker basket and threw it at her. “Fine. But this is the last time, okay?”

Gita caught the flower, stuck it into her hair and blew her a kiss.

Gita stood to the side of her parents’ stall, thumb sliding rhythmically across her phone screen. It was barely eight in the morning. Every so often, her eyes wandered from posts of attractive people getting on jets and carefully arranged squares of food to the stream of people flowing into the market. Even here, you could pick out those with more. Some women were followed by their helpers, luxury car keyring fobs dangling from well-manicured fingers. Little purses adorned with interlocking G’s or C’s and the more common LV, weaved strategically between stalls. Gita often wondered why these purses even entered wet markets. If she had interlocking G’s or C’s type of money, she would only enter upscale supermarkets.

A familiar banner appeared on her phone. It was the entrance to the wet market, posted on...Eileen Tan’s Instagram story less than two minutes ago! Eileen was the most popular girl in

class. Gita's eyes widened as she read the words in the middle of the picture: *Should be sleeping. Got dragged here. Wet markets are so GROSS.*

Gita could not have agreed more.

She swivelled her head about looking for Eileen then stopped abruptly, not wanting to attract attention with movement that would be more appropriate at a tennis match.

Her slippers smacked uncontrollably into the wet floor, with slimy ooze rolling greasily between her toes as she hurriedly searched through the crowd for her target.

"Eileen. Go ask for a bouquet of Stargazers."

"By myself?"

Gita's heart seized at the petulant voice. Perhaps, if the sounds of the wet market had continued unbroken, Eileen and her mother would have eventually wandered off. Unfortunately, Ramani chose that moment to call out mutton prices to the surrounding shoppers, her enthusiastic girly voice cutting through the din like a knife through butter. Gita watched as Eileen's eyes widened in recognition. Eileen aimed the camera at Ramani's gloved and aproned form as she handed over bulging plastic bags to customers and punched numbers into the till.

It was too late for Ramani. In the next half-minute, pictures of her manning the mutton stall were sure to be all over social media.

But Gita could still save herself, if she acted fast.

"AmmaIfeelsickIneedtogoseeyouathomesorrybye!" Gita said in one breath before sprinting to the back of the stall, down the fishmongers' row and out into fiery sunshine.

"Gita!" She turned to see Ramani jogging towards her. "Are you okay? You look pale?"

"What are you doing here?" Gita hissed, ducking low. "Shit, did she see you?"

"See me? Who? Gita, are you having a fever?" Ramani tried to feel her forehead.

"Stop! Don't put your disgusting mutton-stink fingers on me!"

"Excuse me? These mutton-stink fingers are a favour to you."

“Ohmygod. Eileen Tan just saw you. She *saw* you selling mutton with all that blood on your apron! She took a picture!”

“Why would she take a picture?”

“To show everyone what a loser you are working at this stupid wet market! And, oh my god, she probably heard you running after me, which means she probably knows I was there too! Oh god. This is so bad.” Gita pressed her palms to forehead as she paced.

“How? How is this bad?” Ramani demanded.

Gita stopped right in front of her. “You know why. We promised never to tell anyone what our parents do for a living.”

“No. We promised that we’d never tell anyone what *your* parents do for a living. I’ve no problem with what any of them do. It’s an honest living.”

Gita and Ramani’s face carried the same frustration. Their mouths sprang open simultaneously, undoubtedly to continue arguing, but the turmeric-yellow cloth fluttered lazily into the space between them, one corner tenuously tethered to Ramani’s apron. Before either could react, a large cloud, shaped like a mischievous boy with cherubic cheeks, blew the cloth off her apron and into the sky.

Without a word, they chased after it, ducking and diving through the crowded car park.

“I don’t see it!”

“To your right!” Ramani yelled.

The sight of two frantic girls, one in an apron, boots, and a singular glove and the other in slippers with yellow flowers jammed into her hair, snatching at the air urged pedestrians out of their way. The cheeky cloud baited them down a few streets, through bushes and across a park. After what felt much longer than just ten minutes, the girls found themselves on a hill, in front of a mysterious tiny house with a blue door.

“Do you know where we are?” Gita panted.

“No. None of this looks familiar. But we couldn’t have gone more than a kilometre from the market.”

“Whatever. We’ll find our way back. We need to find that cloth. My dad will freak.”

Ramani squeezed her hand reassuringly.

Just then, the door to the house blew open. An Indian woman wrapped in a sky-blue sari and adorned in gold, stood at the door. In the heat, the yards of cloth that covered her only made the girls feel warmer. The woman smiled at them, revealing teeth as bright as the sapphire that sparkled at the top of her forehead. Though the air was still, the sari’s pallu and pleats rippled without pause.

“My son has brought you here.”

“Uh. No...we don’t know your son. We came here looking for a cloth, about this big.”
Ramani held her hands apart.

“I might have it inside. My son can be very naughty.”

Alarms went off in Gita’s head. “Let’s just go, Ramani.”

“Children these days are very careful, aren’t they? If only they were just as careful with important things,” the woman said slyly.

“We’re leaving,” Gita said, tugging Ramani’s t-shirt.

“We can’t! The cloth is missing because of me. We can’t go back to your parents without it.”

“Alright, you don’t have to come in. I’ll bring it out,” the woman said.

She snapped her fingers. Nine wooden boxes appeared on the grass before them. Gita and Ramani gasped, grabbing each other.

“How’d you do that?” Ramani demanded.

“This is the House of Wind. We’re capable of many things.”

“What do you think that is?” Ramani whispered to Gita.

“Probably some sort of cult. We should go. Now.”

“Call the police?”

“And say what? I don’t even know where we are.”

“IG live?”

“What if that just makes her kill us quicker?”

The woman’s eyebrows raised with each exchange. “Really!” she said indignantly. “Why would I want to hurt either of you? You’re only here because my son was up to his tricks again.” She swept her hands over the boxes. “One of these boxes has the cloth you’re looking for.”

“So...we’re supposed to guess and then you’ll let us go?” Gita asked.

“No. You can open all of them. But you can only take one.”

“Is this a trick? Why would we want the others?” Gita said.

Exasperated, she snapped her fingers again. All nine lids blew open. The box in the middle contained the cloth. The surrounding eight boxes held gold, stacks of money, gargantuan jewels and even blank cheques.

“Pick one.”

“Easy,” Ramani scoffed. She bent down for the middle box.

“Uh-uh,” the woman said. “Not you. Her.” She pointed at Gita.

“Whatever. Gita, grab it and let’s go.”

Gita shuffled forward, her eyes running over the abundance hungrily. There was enough in one of these boxes to banish the wet market to mere memory. Her parents could sell the stall and be mutton suppliers. They could buy a bungalow, mansion even, with new cars. Gita could have all the latest gadgets and clothes. Ramani too! Surely there was enough in here to change both their families’ lives.

Gita’s hand wandered over to the box with the three blank cheques.

“Gita! What are you doing?”

“This could change our lives. We could be normal, do teenage stuff. Don’t you see? This is an opportunity.”

Ramani stared at Gita. “You can’t be serious? That cloth is priceless. You’ve said that yourself! What? You just changed your mind?”

“What good has it ever done my family? The only time we finish our entire supply is during Deepavali! And don’t tell me that has anything to do with that stupid yellow cloth. With any one of these, I could buy my dad a hundred new yellow cloths and layer them over a hundred cash registers. Filled with hundreds of dollars!”

Silence.

“Ramani you could go to school anywhere. Europe, America. You could have that fancy laptop you wanted,” Gita pleaded.

“You’re not making any sense! Do you really think she’s actually going to give us this stuff? That cloth is your family’s legacy. Why do I need to remind you of its value?”

The woman cut in. “Ten seconds left, girls.”

“You never said there was a time limit!”

The woman just beamed at Gita.

“Gita, no. Look, let me take the cloth.”

“No, it has to be her,” the woman chirped. “Eight seconds.”

“This is ridiculous. The value of the cloth-”

“Can’t compare to what we *can* have.”

“Six!” the woman called merrily.

“Gita, your parents will never forgive you if you lose the cloth! It’s survived four generations!”

“It’s my decision.” Her great-grandfather’s name, sticking out so clearly against the yellow, seemed to stare at her. Gita ripped her eyes away.

“Four! Three! Two!”

Gita lunged for the nearest box filled with gold bars. She snapped the lid shut as Ramani cried out in horror. The clack of the lid reverberated through them and suddenly, they were back outside the wet market where the cloth had first gone missing.

Ecstatic, Gita fumbled open the lid of the heavy box. The smile slid off her face as Ramani's hands flew to her own.

For the box was bare except for three old bricks.

Kesh

Tessa Kaur

i stand in the garden outside
my grandmother's bedroom window.
roots twine around my ankles.

my grandmother watches me –
her mournful eyes, her paper skin,
her sagging face, frozen.

her hair is a long winding river,
a dirty grey reminiscent of a time when
our island was still filthy, not yet a city.

her Kara dances as her hands wring,
bird-boned wrists twisting
as she looks at me from above.

from the garden, i call to her.
“biji, let me up,” i plead.
my feet sink slowly into the soil.

i never learned the tongue she speaks.
when i call to her, she is
uncomprehending.

her tongue rolls in a curling script
held together with horizontal lines.
i only speak in the language of my peers –

“hello”, “thank you”,
“yes, my skin is different from yours”,
“yes, i know i do not belong here”.

in punjabi school they pulled my hair.
in chinese class they called me dirty-blooded.
i had no culture, only a desire to assimilate.

i do not want to live here,
i just want to be let in.
yes, i know i do not belong.

my grandmother stares at me,
eyes clouded over.
i don't know if she recognises me.

the length of her braid
coils on the ground.
it bathes in pools of moonlight.

i reach for my own plait
and find cropped hair.
i wear no bangle, carry no blade.

she looks at me, betrayed
and betraying.
she turns away from the window.

Love Lores

Kiran Kaur

If Waris Shah wrote a folklore
for the twenty-first century,
he would chastise us for
how our thumbs swipe
to find temporary solace.
No one would put us
in a mausoleum
unlike Heer and Ranjha:
an indictment of bodies
crumbling, a celebration
of mortal limits but immortal yearnings.
Instead, a multiplayer game ensues:
my replies becoming shorter
while you await, eyes fixed
on the elusive
three
dots.

Sohni, of another time,
clinging to an earthen pot, unbaked,
parts the glistening midnight water
into two, before sinking
atom after atom.
Mahiwal on the other end,
jumps in and the skies
bear witness
to the perishing pair.
I ask my mother if I could do such a thing,
tide through the Singapore River
to meet a forlorn beloved.
She says, "*Aiya,*
the river is shallow
you won't drown please!"
Even if we tried,
the river would spew us out
into Marina Bay, entertainment fodder
for spectators crowding the pool
57 floors above -
the only infinity
we hanker after.

A tectonic deception
they don't teach us
in secondary school Geography:
Sassi trudges barefoot
searching for Punnu and ends up
in the belly of the desert.
Hearing the same agonising call,
God rips the mountains again
swallowing Punnu. They meet
under layers of sand.
I wonder if any of us
would do the same,
scale dunes and peaks
in the blistering sun
when we barely
stay parched,
thirsts after
thirsts quenched.

Ganesh Chaturthi

Akash Mattupalli

Every year, my mother rejoices at our Telugu calendar,
urging me to follow her to Little India's Jothi Store.
An array of intricate idols sit on a plastic table;
I always choose the friendly, warm, inviting one
with a parabolic tusk and a pandikokku rat -
his loyal steed, ever ready for service.

The next day, my mother awakes at the crack of the koel's dawn,
mass-producing pongal, vada and punugulu:
recipes of which are hard-wired in her brain.
With her bounty of roses, marigolds and jasmines,
my mother decorates Ganesh with lavish carpets and garlands.
My father dusts off a Telugu booklet with intricate knots of script
before begrudgingly teaching me to wear a lungi for the tenth time
as we gather on a mat for our prayer.

After some bell trills, incense merry-go-rounds and presenting the prasadam,
my father clears his voice softly to narrate the eponymous story.
I hold my mother's hand when Parvati makes Ganesh with wet clay,
I gasp when Shiva beheads his own son.
I sigh softly when He cauterises the elephant head,
attaching it onto his son's body.

Ganesh loves to eat, as do I.
He holds up a platter of modaks,
I eye the moti-choor laddoos before me, hungrily.
As he becomes me and I, him,
I grow into my four arms, versatile trunk and potbelly.
I write the Mahabharata with my broken tusk as Vyasa dictates it.

The celestial sky darkens to the tinge of iodine
when the Moon maniacally laughs
at the muscular rat briefly struggling to carry me.
His craters open into menacing mouths,
his skin-piercing light glaring at my paunch.
It was the same shock I was jolted by
when I matriculated prematurely to Bossini's adult section,
my universe-containing potbelly no longer adhering
to the commercially threaded pipe-dreams of slenderness.

Imagine the vindication I feel when Parvati curses the Moon,
“Stay off my son and no one will look at you on his birthday!”
The Moon was damned to be an illusionist, going missing once every month.
Unable to curse the lack of wider children’s clothes,
I stuff myself with my mother’s cooking, defeated.

During an odd-numbered day, we quietly drive up to Changi Beach.
Nestled in two green Mustafa covers, Ganesh sleeps in his flowerbed.
We slowly nudge him into the water as he bobs,
waving at us as he performs his own illusionist trick,
becoming one with the ocean floor.

The Conundrum of Ardhanarishvar

Gayatri Balasubramanian

The five-storeyed gopuram of the Shivan temple loomed over me as I took my slippers off. Gathering the folds of my sari, I carefully crossed over the giant front step and absentmindedly rang the small golden bells on the mahogany gates of the temple.

The familiar scenery of the temple greeted me: the murals of gods on the walls; the priests in veshtis chanting mantras at the central shrine; the gatherings of the devout in the hall, the children running around in their small paavadai and dhoti while their parents conversed; the whiff of the jasmine flowers the women adorned their hair with; the subtle sandalwood from the temple offerings; the small Ardhanarishvar shrine at the side of the temple.

As a child, I spent nearly every Saturday evening there. Amma had always been an ardent devotee of Shivan and performed a near-constant fast for Him. Every Saturday she would bring me along to the Shivan temple, leaving me to run amok while the priest piously bathed the lingam with UHT milk and Q.B.B ghee she had bought. Though most children would have wanted to spend their weekends differently, I did not mind. To me, the temple seemed mystical and larger-than-life, filled with interesting things to explore.

My favourite part of the temple had always been the Ardhanarishvar shrine. The first time I came across it, I was six.

“Amma.” I tugged at her sari. “Who is this God?” I asked.

Unlike the other idols who were either dressed in dhotis or saris, Ardhanarishvar was dressed in both. On the left side, the statue was fiercely clad with tiger skin, the hand holding a trident firmly. On the right, it was draped with a maroon silk sari, and the neck was adorned with a shiny pearl necklace along with a soft pink lotus placed on the hand of the statue.

Amma laughed. “Interesting, isn’t it? Ardhanarishvar is actually half Shivan, who is male and half Shakthi, who is female. When the male and female halves fuse, Ardhanarishvar emerges. A great power who can grant many wishes. In fact,” Amma ruffled my hair softly, “you were born after a yearlong prayer to Shivan. It is why I named you Shakthi, you know. To express thanks for my prayers being answered.”

Pretty, I had thought, gazing at the shrine. *So pretty*.

Since then, I abandoned all my other playing spots in the temple and made the Ardhanarishvar shrine my mainstay. I would spend hours just gazing at the shrine, admiring the different costumes that the idol had on every visit.

Nowadays though, visits to the Shivan temple were much more sporadic as I no longer lived with Amma. Still, the visits I did make were for her, with Shivan as our arbitrator. Besides, Amma would have plenty to say about my life choices if I visited her at home, but she could hardly pick a fight with me at the temple.

The high, monotone chants of the priest broke me out of nostalgia. The priest was carefully circling the ghee lamp around Ardhanarishvar, while a few devotees stood in front of the shrine. I spotted Amma at the front of the crowd, her fingers tightly clasped, mumbling slokas under her breath. Amidst the priest's Sanskrit, I heard my name and my astrological sign. As usual, Amma had commissioned a special archanai—prayer—for me.

I silently waited until the priest finished and handed the blessed offerings to Amma, who then turned to face me.

“The sari looks nice,” Amma said, anointing my forehead with the turmeric that the priest had just given to her.

“It is pretty,” I agreed placidly. Pretty, but the synthetic material had been pulling at and chafing my skin all day.

My clothing options were chief amongst the things Amma and I disagreed on back when we lived together. Amma wanted me to wear demure dresses; I wanted to wear loose streetwear. Amma wanted my hair waist length; I wanted my hair close-cropped. Amma wanted my skin bare and pale, like the Fair and Lovely advertisements on Sun TV; I liked my sleeve tattoos.

I never thought there was anything wrong with me as a child. I had always wanted to wear miniskirts on some days and trousers on some days, but what of it? The god I visited every weekend, whom Amma had been praying to for years, wore both women's and men's clothes too.

It took me a while to understand. That what was divinity in Gods was for mortals, sin. That what was revered in Gods was in mortals, shunned. That even as Amma prayed to a bigender God, she never wanted a bigender child.

It was not that Amma and I had never been close. In fact, we were inseparable in my childhood. After Amma had divorced my father, it had just been the two of us. It was in my teenage years, when I became more insistent on being myself, that the cracks in our relationship formed. I

had wanted to bind my chest while wearing skirts, and I wanted to shave my head while wearing hoops. Amma just could not understand me.

It all came to a head when I was fifteen. "Shakthi please," she had sighed, brushing the loose strands from her makeshift bun. "First your form teacher called to complain about your shaved head, and now you want to turn up at the Deepavali family gathering in men's clothes. Can't you see what others will think? Your relatives will think it's because you grew up with just your Amma." Amma's eyes were weighed down by purple bruises under her eyes that marked her many late night shifts at work. "Don't make things difficult for me. Just cooperate for once," she had said.

So I cooperated. I went online, pulled out sari tutorials, learned to tie a sari by myself and turned up to the Deepavali gathering like a good Indian girl.

But how could I explain to Amma that I knew all too well what others thought?

How could I explain to Amma the everpresent disquiet in my own skin because of and despite that? The bitterness and rage that had taken over me? How could I tell her about the girls in my class refusing to let a "dyke" sit next to them, about eating in the toilet alone every recess? How could I tell her about being pushed out of the cai fan queue the week before for being an "Indian Ah Lian with scary tattoos"?

With every argument ending with us going to bed angry, the cracks widened until it became an uncrossable chasm between us. Once I turned thirty-five, I moved out into my own place. I had been forced between choosing myself and Amma, but why did it have to be this way?

Amma and I silently circled the temple, in what was a familiar routine to both of us. It was tradition to always circle the premises thrice before leaving.

I wondered if Amma regretted praying to have me. How many times must she have circled the shrine that one year in hopes for a child? For me? I knew I resented Amma every time I smeared my tattoos with cheap foundation and wrestled on a sari for her, even though I never told her so. Every visit made to her was meaningless, every clockwise circle around the temple aimless. The weight of the unspoken words snuffed out any potential conversations, leaving us in suffocating silence every visit. Yet Amma could not let go of her affection for me, and I could not let go of my duty towards her. We were trapped in this hollow mockery of a mother-daughter relationship, performing rituals without reason and prayers without piety.

Amma clasped her hands together one last time before she stepped over the threshold of the temple. The golden bells on the gate tinkled softly with her touch on her way out.

“Will you drop by home for Deepavali this year?” Amma asked as she slipped her sandals on.

“Maybe.” But I knew I would not.

How many Kannagis must burn?

S Shivaane

At 9, Parvati is bullied relentlessly
for curly, oily hair and brown skin.
Her form teacher hears, says nothing.
At PTM, Mdm Teo tells her mother,
“She needs to talk to her classmates more.”
Parvati swallows down a defence.
Mum buys her palkova on the way back.

At 13, Kannagi is shut down mercilessly.
Her uncles tell her she’s too loud,
a girl won’t change the world.
Ammamma’s stern glare silences them.
She smiles down, Kannagi beams up.
Grandmother dies 2 years later, too young.
Her Amma follows soon after.

At 16, Parvati’s boyfriend, Zach,
breaks up with her at a Din Tai Fung.
“My parents don’t like Indians.”
Says that as if this isn’t his choice, too.
She rises wordlessly, and leaves.
She can bear this heartache.

At 17, Kannagi is at a breaking point -
Kovalan loses all their money
lusting after his too-young Madhavi.
Her husband looks at her with tears and guilt.
She knows they’ll overcome this, but
can she bear another heartache?

At 20, Parvati attends her mother’s funeral.
She can hear the aunties bitching.
“She must have been ashamed,
her daughter is not Indian enough.”
Parvati decides she needs an outlet.

At 17, Kannagi loses her husband.
Kovalan, murdered on a fatal error.
Her patience is obliterated.
Today, her sorrows cannot be matched.
She storms into the city.

At 17, Kannagi burns Madurai down.

At 21, Parvati auditions for Silappadikaram.

She curses those complicit.

She's never realised how close it hits home.

She damns their apathy.

Director Darsh tells her to relate more to Kannagi.

She sacrifices herself to a better world.

She glares, feels a familiar anger rise.

“How can I bear this injustice?”

“Almost thought you didn't have it in you.”

Kannagi roars, hair flying.

Parvati bares her teeth in a sharp grin.

At 17, Kannagi dies bleeding.
Carried to the heavens, she is deified.
Her defiant look moulded into stone.
She stands, a beacon of justice.
The modern world descends into another hell.

At 22, Parvati finishes the last show.
She's had brown girls come up to her.
They find comfort in her performance.
She won't be deified.
But she'll do what she can.

Witch-to-be

Sarah Begum

“You should tie your hair.”
It’s too garmi, I admit despite unheeding
the warnings Dadi has laid –
mistaken for mere midnight
kahaniyan that spoke of the dead,
about a shadow swinging between trees,
stalking at night, branches creak
as my sweaty shoulders sense
how the air around my ears has gone silent.
Exposed, I should’ve worn a jacket,
curls trembling, awaiting her cackle.
For not listening,
she’ll come.

I walk on the roadside, earphones plugged in,
but no song plays. I want to sense my attacker
before they feast on my screams,
just like the figure after my dreams,
when I wake alone afraid to turn in my bed,
thinking of what I’d do if my name was called
in between the 3am ticking and scratching
I shine my eyes, in the andhera
like a torchlight asking,

“Kaun hain wahan?”

I am a look-over-the-shoulder watcher,
what if I feel a breath, aare kya karoon?
Should I check? Will she follow me?
The one aunties speak about almost too softly,
with ankles turned and free to roam
don’t stare above street lights
flickering all the way home,
chupa rahi hai in frangipani trees,
epitome of anti-men – deceased,
scorned by her lover,
but someone like me, an Other
we’ve been taught to fear
if we walk under rustling leaves
the sweet smell deceives,
a terror that no one
ever sees
coming,

somebody's coming

a man walks towards me in the distance,
Two horrors,

I'm in the middle
asking myself, which of the two scares me more?

A Chudail in the darkness,
a repeated lore

or a pseudo Majnu,
we've been faulted to lure

"Shouldn't let your hair loose when it's late!"
I don't think a Chudail will be the only one
yanking my locks, teasing my choice
for dressing unprotected, swallowing my voice
how easy to recognise a woman in the raat,
hair in the wind and hips inviting
the men who walk by me to sing

I'd expect a creepy laugh from Her,
having travelled far from the gaun
to the HDBs of Singapore
cried herself to the shore
dyed her henna khameez
her dupatta white
dirt-braided hair untangled
in another's fright
Dadi's and Atta's tales reunite
for maternal tongues to write
songs that Chudail, and her sister Cik Pon
had once hammered and nailed to their heads,
haunted by old sayings: Beware of Women
(who rule the night in places where we're told we cannot),
hush –

someone's coming.

Kelly

Shanthini Selvarajan

It was a warm and windless night, the sharp white of the moon a glaring contrast against the deep black sky. The winding stretch of Telok Ayer was inviting—neon lights on the signboards of bars flashing extra bright, daring people to enter, to explore.

Kelly watched as people slowly filtered in and out of the quiet, nondescript bar she was silently seated at. This bar was clearly less popular than the others along the stretch; it was barely filled with patrons. Her gaze swept across the bar, taking in its entirety—the mildly outdated medieval-looking interior decor, the faint smell of grease from bar snacks, the beginnings of fresh mould on the top corners of the walls. Her eyes then parked on an odd painting that was attached to a wall in the midsection of the bar. It was garishly beautiful—bold strokes of crimson splattered across the canvas as a demonic face stared straight back at her. She felt drawn to it, losing herself in the entity’s soulless eyes.

Just then, her thoughts were interrupted by an alluring voice, a voice that signalled years of refined confidence and charisma.

“Hi there, are you Kelly?”

She glanced up at the handsome face staring back at her that had a million-dollar smile plastered on. She inhaled deeply, forcing herself to snap back to reality before getting up to shake hands with the unknown.

“You must be Kannan! Sorry about the cold and clammy hands. Feeling some nerves, I suppose. Nice to meet you, anyway.”

In response, he winked at her, instantaneously lighting up the whole bar, elevating the subpar interior and making that garish, violent painting a distant memory.

“Don’t worry about it! I wouldn’t blame you. You’re not the first girl to have been nervous to go on a date with me, you know?” he half-joked.

She felt something stir in her, a hunger of sorts. As if on cue, she could hear the beginning of soft rumbles emerging from her stomach. She stared awkwardly at him as she let out an airy laugh. “Shall we order?”

“Yes, please. I’m starving. Let’s start with wine? Are you feeling red or white? What’s your preference?”

Kelly took a moment to let that question sink in. It was a simple question and on any other day, she would have answered that question in a heartbeat, but there was something about the humid air tonight. She could hear the growls from her stomach growing louder.

“I’d love some white. Feels purer. I’ve never been a fan of the red stuff.”

She was met with a weighted pause, which made her wonder if he had missed what she said. Was she perhaps too quiet to be heard? Was she too meek? All the boys she had dated previously seemed to think so. They had made her feel both hyper-visible and invisible simultaneously, visually undressing her with their leery stares while constantly talking over her.

Just as she was about to restate her choice of wine, Kannan responded. “Hmm, let’s do red. I’m kind of feeling that.”

She was so sure of it now. This wild craving stirring at the very core of her being—meticulously boiling while patiently waiting to erupt. She smiled politely back at him, readjusting her hands on her lap as he proceeded to snap his fingers to get the waiter’s attention.

The rest of the date was a hazy, unpolished blur. Topics ranged from dating expectations to families, quirky tastes in music, and even touchy political issues. Conversation flowed freely out of Kannan, strings of well-constructed words and sentences pouring out of his charismatic mouth. This was a man seasoned in the art of appearing to know everything at once. Nothing escaped his opinion. Kelly quietly absorbed the endless stream of comments targeting her from all directions as she sat stewing in her own silence and doing what she did best—smiling politely back at men. She was ravenous now; the rumbling deep within her core had now turned into banging, as if screaming for release.

She noticed that there were a couple of pizza slices left from when they had ordered dinner. The pizza itself was mediocre, slightly burnt around the edges, soggy in the middle, and topped with some unknown cheese that left a bitter taste in her mouth. She had already eaten her share of the pizza, but oddly, she still felt empty inside. She reached for the leftover pizza slices and transferred them all to her dinner plate.

“Damn, that’s impressive. You sure do eat a lot for a girl.”

Not the first time she had heard that on a first date. The beast residing in her stomach broke free then, dismantling the walls that it was so painstakingly contained in. She wolfed down the last few remaining slices of cold pizza, a futile attempt at satiating the beast. With crumbs dotting her wine-stained lips, she smiled politely at him.

“Now that the food’s out of the way and we’re out of wine, would you like to come back to my place?” she asked, her eyes glinting under the dim, sultry lights of the bar.

For a split second, Kannan grew visibly excited at that inviting request, like a dog teased with promises of plump, juicy treats. He immediately reverted back to his seemingly calm and cool disposition, as he tried to shake off his embarrassing excitement.

“Indian girls in Singapore don’t ever do this, but I guess you’re different. Had a good feeling about you when I walked into this bar.” He grabbed his credit card and placed it on the bill tab before snapping his fingers back at the waiter once again.

“Let’s grab some cheap vodka and head back to your place. Tell you what—I’ll bring my Maserati round front, pick up supplies from 7-Eleven, and come back here to pick you up. Just wait for me at the entrance.”

“Grab me an egg salad sandwich too, won’t you? I’ll meet you out front.” Kelly had a good feeling about tonight.

Smooth urban beats flooded Kelly’s dimly lit room where the mid-century floral wallpaper was intermittently obscured by incense smoke sensually wafting through the air. Kannan was perched on a deep plum armchair in the furthest corner, slowly scanning the room for all its quirky details. His eyes landed on an abstract painting in the middle of the wall, a plain white canvas violently streaked with stark crimson, so stark that it almost resembled-

“Hey, made us some Bloody Marys. This should mask the gasoline-like taste of cheap vodka,” Kelly said, interrupting his thoughts.

Relief washed over him at the thought of greater intoxication and the interesting ways in which the night could unfold. He slowly sipped the concoction as he furtively observed Kelly in her entirety. From her sweet heart-shaped face, sparkling almond eyes, and delicate neck, to her full breasts, slim waist and endlessly long legs. He felt himself growling slightly hard as he willed himself to stop shamelessly staring. He spotted tufts of hair on her legs as well, but nothing some tips on waxing would not solve.

Just as Kannan was about to inch towards her to kiss her on her seemingly soft and full lips, he felt a wild dizziness take root in him. It sprang out of nowhere, settling deep in his being, spreading through his numb limbs to reach the very extremities of his body. A loud shattering sound followed; he had anxiously dropped his cocktail glass. Kannan immediately clutched his pounding head and fell to his knees.

Puzzled, he looked up at Kelly, only to find her smiling at him. She now looked taller than before, towering over him as her polite smile morphed into a wild and manic grin. She was starting to look unhinged, which terrified Kannan, as he broke out in cold sweat.

He then spotted something glistening in her palm—an old, serrated knife that had visible spots and streaks of crimson on it. A knife that appeared to have seen too much, that seemed to contain all the anger and violence in the world within it. He could feel the heavy burden of that knife. Panic seeped through every inch of Kannan as his captive body crashed onto the hardwood floor. Kelly purposefully strode towards him, raising her knife with such conviction, before swiftly introducing Kannan to a world of excruciating pain.

It was slightly past 2 a.m, as Kelly sat on the now bloodstained plum armchair. She was hard at work on her latest art installation, adding a new piece to the collection, refining every little bump and nook on it all while nibbling on the cheap and overly mushy egg salad sandwich. She finally felt satiated for the night.

She sighed in relief as she weaved her sewing needle to close up the final stitch in her art piece. She was finally done. Gracefully standing up, she walked over to the giant mirror in her closet to take a look at the beauty she had assembled.

There she stood completely naked, all decked out in her finest jewels, the curves of her body accentuated by all that brilliant, shimmering gold. Carefully placed around her neck was a grand garland of severed brown male heads strung together with the most powerful adhesives, and tastefully embalmed with precision. A belt of severed brown arms was similarly hooked around her waist. The garland shone with a valour of sorts, like a symbol of victory in battle. She beamed at her creation, as the faces on her garland stared back with fear etched on them permanently. There was Navin, Dinesh, Prabhu, and... whats-his-face. Those were some memorable first dates.

Through the mirror, she noticed Kannan's decapitated body resting lifelessly on the floor, just a few metres behind her. She shuffled backwards until she was standing just in front of him. She confidently placed one foot on his now cold and limp body. Unimaginable power surged through her veins, as all was right with the world once again.

Soon after, this wild and racing power descended into a sweet tranquility, one where love and peace resided.

She removed her garland and placed it on her study desk as she grabbed her iPhone that was plugged into a charging outlet. She then picked up her unfinished drink, sat back on her armchair and opened the Tinder application on her phone to begin swiping once again. If only she could find someone to quell her voracious appetite once and for all.

Red

Pratyusha Mukherjee

Where I grew up, there stands a hill. My friends
Its name conjures flesh-hungry fish and banana stems. taught me to
The cleverness of a boy and the conceit of a king, wear only red
the short-lived triumph underwear on
of a David exam days
whose to win over
blood flows like the Ganges—such is Lady Luck:
stains her wagging tongue. She was her power, they
coloured like the night, not to be loved but always
the soil and then feared.
centuries later the
imaginations of credulous primary school
children, like eight year old me who was shocked
to dig under the grass and find remnants of red.

Contributors

Gayatri Balasubramanian



Gayatri is a current undergraduate at NUS and a first-time writer. Although she has always been a reader, she has picked up Singlit in recent years and has been greatly inspired by the many Singaporean Indian writers who have carved a space for their identities in the Singapore literature sphere. Having visited temples plenty, she always thought there was a queer tilt to Shivan's mythology, and is happy to have had the opportunity to explore this idea through Mahogany. In her free time, she dances street jazz and reads.

Sarah Farheenshah Begum



Sarah Farheenshah Begum 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 identifies as a Singaporean-Sikh woman in a highly fractured global order; big things like love, loss, yearning and belonging occupy her mind 24/7. She spends her free time curating mood-specific, esoteric playlists. Currently working on a poetry-memoir hybrid, she hopes to complete it before she finds herself eligible for the singles HDB scheme.

Tessa Kaur



Tessa Kaur is an inherently Bad Punjabi Girl by virtue of being half-Chinese. She is extremely spice-intolerant, essentially monolingual, and prefers to be horizontal on her bed as much as possible. She has just hit her quarter-life crisis.

Akash Mattupalli



Having lived in four countries, studied in nine schools, and served National Service in a country he wasn't born in, Akash started to write at the age of fifteen to get into grips with his identity. In the future, he wishes to pursue Engineering in the US and continue writing as a serious hobby.

Pratyusha Mukherjee



Pratyusha Mukherjee first delved into poetry during her itinerant childhood, after which she settled into the island nation she now calls home. She reads to rile herself up and writes to calm herself down, and is incapable of listening to a song without straining to overanalyse its lyrics.

S Shivaane



Shivaane is a 21-year-old Tamil-Malayali woman pursuing her Anthropology degree. She is passionate about amplifying South Indian voices and is figuring out how best she can do that. When she's not annoying neighbours with 4am singing, you can find her watching bootlegs or oversharing on social media.

Shanthini Selvarajan



Shan is a researcher by day, and an avid redditor by night. Her research interests include race, ethnicity, religion, racial relations and social cohesion, and she has several published works. She enjoys reading fiction, writing poetry and binging on anime in her free time.

Anittha Thanabalan



Anittha's debut novel, *The Lights That Find Us*, was published in 2018. Efforts to keep herself and her dog alive include freelance writing and tutoring English Literature. Anittha is currently working on her second novel.