

mahogany



Edited by Prasanthi Ram and Jaryl George Solomon



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Edited by Prasanthi Ram and Jaryl George Solomon

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Contents

Editor's Note

Poetry Editor

Jaryl George Solomon

2020

5

Fiction Editor

Prasanthi Ram

In Memory of

7

Contributors' Works

Poetry

Choke

Subash Kumar

9

Fiction

This Masala Tastes like Sand

Yvonne Arivalagan

12

Poetry

Diwali

Akash Mattupalli

16

Poetry

food therapy for cold college days

Meghana Vinai

18

Poetry

What To Do When Your Girlfriend Is In Love With Birds

Roobi Gbelani

21

Poetry

If looking is loving then gazing is grieving

Kiran Kaur Dhalimal

23

Poetry

Dead Tongue

Tarini Tilve

24

Fiction

Number One

Anusha K

27

Contributors

32

Editor's Note (Poetry)

Jaryl George Solomon

2020

I often feel nostalgic for the year 2020. It's been barely 2 years since the world stopped spinning on its axis momentarily and everyone had to shutter themselves as a result. Even though my concept of time has not fully recovered since that seismic shift in how we function, I still find myself yearning to wake up in my pre-pandemic room.

I oddly long for the moments I would spend binge-watching the shows I always said I was going to (but never did) and playing the games that were once resigned to a dusty fate on my Nintendo Switch Lite. I was jobless and subsisting on my paltry savings, yet, I was surprisingly accepting of it all. Like the rest of the world, I partitioned my days into manageable segments to keep my sanity going and my body functioning. Some blocks of days were dedicated to sieving through my belongings, holding things close to my chest to sense if any joy remained. Other days were spent trying to put together a home workout station in a corner of my room as I tried my best to adhere to some form of fitness to combat the sedentary life I was too comfortable with. And once every two weeks, I'd clumsily slip my fingers into the finicky parts of a disposable plastic glove, suit up with a face shield and mask to head to NTUC at midnight to gingerly shop for groceries. Everything felt like an infraction during the circuit breaker.

Nostalgia is often tethered to the effervescent warmth we feel when reliving the past. Last I checked, 2020 was an inferno of anxiety, weight gain and depression naps. The cards were undoubtedly stacked against me but everyone else was equally in complete shambles. That made 2020 redeemable. Everywhere I looked, all of us had our necks bent and strained as we desperately licked our wounds. The clueless glaze in my eyes was justified. The haunting helplessness was justified. The pat on the back for taking a shower – everything was justified because we were all collectively struggling in our bedrooms. Every bad thought that swirled in my mind was rationalised through the lens of the pandemic. I miss pinning the blame of any inadequacy I had on the virus. I miss the normalcy of feeling like utter shit.

Right now, I can only accept that this is how (my) mediocrity feels like. I'm still sitting down with my hands interlaced, thumbs circling around each other at a tolerable pace as the rest of the world speeds up their post-pandemic jog into a sprint. We're back to how nobody waits for the traffic lights to turn green before they cross, to how aunties shove past me for the reserved seats, to how every little mistake is singularly my fault because there simply isn't any other wave of crippling disease to offload my blame to. So, what do people like me do while everyone we know reverts to their old habits of moving forward unflinchingly?

We try.

Despite how deviously stacked Life's cards can be, we just have to keep trying – be it enthusiastically or reluctantly. I believe our lineup of poets have successfully showcased the many shades of trying we have adopted in our lives. In Subash Kumar's 'Choke', we see how one's attempt at resisting brown machismo can be clouded with our own internalised flirtations with it. Akash Mattupalli's 'Diwali' encourages us to confront why we try to educate others on our larger-than-life customs despite their essentialised and stereotypical perceptions of our community. For those who have been miles away from your family, Meghana Vinai's 'food therapy for cold college days' encapsulates everything we have tried to feel closer to home, even if it means ruining a rice cooker. In contrast, 'What To Do When Your Girlfriend Is In Love With Birds' by Roohi Ghelani reminds us that sometimes, you don't have to try too hard with your loved one – just be there and be present. Kiran Kaur Dhaliwal's 'If looking is loving then gazing is grieving' depicts how we try to find our value through the idols we watch while 'Dead Tongue' by Tarini Tilve is a gory prose poem of the lengths we go to just to fit in.

All in all, I'm thankful to have these poets help me remember the value of consistently trying. Yes, I still look back on 2020 from time to time, missing the ease of living in my room despite the anxieties that lurked just beyond my front door. Mediocre or not, I'm still here and I'm still trying to look ahead, far beyond the splay of Life's cards.

Always trying,

Jaryl

Editor's Note (Fiction)

Prasanthi Ram

In Memory Of

This year, I lost my favourite person in the world. After a long battle with a terminal illness, my father took his last gasping breath on a balmy Sunday afternoon in March. In the initial days after his passing, I struggled to sleep. It almost felt wrong to rest. So, I would lie beside my grieving mother in my parents' king-sized bed and wonder whether he was still with us in the home he worked decades to own. Unable to bear his audible absence, I would distract myself with something quite unlikely: *Bridgerton*. In particular, the second season starring British Indian actresses Simone Ashley and Charithra Chandran. I would watch the show under my blanket late into those nights, desperate to immerse myself in something frivolous (read: raunchy), unapologetically brown (even if it was quite a rojak representation), and separate from the crushing weight of reality. But, as I soon realised, death is everywhere, especially in stories. In a pivotal episode that a kind friend had warned me about, young Viscount Anthony Bridgerton watches his father die before him. This moment catapults him into becoming the head of his family, taking charge of matters he has yet to understand. His unarticulated, unprocessed grief and the weight of his mother's redirected expectations (from his father to him) harden him as a result, a consequence he takes in his stride. These are simply the cards he has been dealt with, just as his father was destined to die suddenly from anaphylaxis after a bee sting.

My father was expected to accept his cards too, even if they destined him for undeserved tragedy; his illness had no cure, and the doctors had nothing to offer but a vague prognosis for his demise. As I watched Anthony's horror unfold onscreen, paralleling my own in some ways, it occurred to me that the greatest betrayal of Life is perhaps not that we are dealt these cards at all. Instead, it is the fact that none of us get to look the Dealer in the eye as they lay them down. We have no way of knowing if they feel immense guilt. We cannot cuss them out. We do not get to ask why, demand a reshuffle, or pick the cards ourselves. Even if we have a nagging suspicion that the deck was rigged to begin with, we do not get to report the Dealer to HR or the equivalent. What remains is an unchangeable bottom-line – we are helpless and must resign to fate.

Yet, while curating this fourth issue “Wildcard,” I have been reminded of how storytelling always finds a way. Through the meadow of our imagination, we *can* transcend this helplessness. We can interrogate and reimagine these unkind, merciless realities. We can resist these cards, even find ways to toss the entire deck out. We can even tell the Dealer to “Fuck right off!” if that so suits our sensibilities.

Our fiction writers, Yvonne Arivalagan and Anusha K, have done just that – both their stories present protagonists who attempt to resist the cards they have been dealt. In “This Masala Tastes Like Sand,” a young man, over a tense meal of masala thosai with his mother, learns to choose his own cards and speak up for himself. In “Number One,” a young lawyer considers the cards she has been dealt as a racial minority and actively tries to beat the glass ceiling. Acceptance and resignation, while considered, find less room in these stories where resistance begins to rear its magnificent head. But they are not entirely out of the picture either. What emerges is a careful tango between the protagonists and the Dealer, to test the limits and push the boundaries of supposed Destiny.

If we contemplate hard enough, we will find that these stories are not entirely divorced from reality either. Sure, they teach us the possibilities of what can be. But they also give us new lenses through which we can understand life, the living, and the dead as they are. My father might have been resigned to his dying, but he still made sure to exercise his agency. He had long told his doctors that he refused anything invasive. Till the very end, even when he could only communicate by blinking, he stuck to his guns. He wanted to live, but not with tubes sticking into and out of his body. He knew he would rather go if it meant leaving with some dignity intact, and he made sure we all respected his decision too. Even if it broke all of us, including him. He taught us that acceptance and resistance need not be mutually exclusive. Perhaps, there’s a middle ground.

Still, I prefer to imagine that if I ever get to meet his Dealer one day, I would look that fucker squarely in the eye and throw a solid punch. My first ever, in fact. Then, my father and I would bump fists (mine, bloody) and commence our tango instead. After all, it only takes two, right?

Rehearsing my punches,
Prasanthi

Choke

Subash Kumar

A druggy Surya enters as Rolex
at the end of Vikram.
He is broad, brave and beguiling.

Around me, the men
clap and roar
for the lion that he is,
his hirsute-hard-wet chest drips
badass-swaggalicious-blood.

Every chuckle of his
demands an extra whistle
from his dutiful fans.

They are here for him,
for the enormity of his presence—
the kind that would fight
an entire army,
or be one.

I quiver in the middle
of all this brown machismo.

A familiar pain punctuates my breath.

He commands his men to call him
Sir.

The gravel in his voice
makes my lungs gasp
like a balloon losing
the last of its air.

Warm blood violently charges through my body.
My neck becomes taut.

I tightly grab onto it, waiting for his beard covered grin to face the frame again.

It is 2:40am.

With a yearnful, tender smile,
you call me *Sir*.

I am lying naked on a creased hotel bed.

As your lips trail down my soft diffident skin, your hands hold onto my wet weary chest.

With your advance, I occupy
your nicotine-plastered throat.

You gag, and my heart thumps like a relentless dhol.

Surya- no, Rolex is now holding
a cleaver blessed with
bright red blood.

There is a man lying headless under him.

I imagine the blood on the cleaver to be warm,
like the blood in his veiny forearms,
not too different from the blood behind the gleaming eyes of his eager fans,
not too different from the blood in my throbbing cock.

I grab your hands from my
heaving chest
and gently guide them
from the collarbone
to the neck.

You first look up,
confused, but
you slowly give way to
my very distinguishable
longing.

As you fasten your hand around my neck,
my always-accelerated panting takes a backseat.

Your forceful imprint
puts a halt to
my hurried heartbeat.

It brings a temporary relief to the
constant murmuring within.

I shed an unwitting tear and call you *Sir*.

This Masala Tastes like Sand

Yvonne Arivalagan

"Amma. I have to tell you something."

The late afternoon rain had slowed to a drizzle. Outside the glass window of the restaurant, the grey sky looked softly charged, like static on wool. Cars rolled cautiously by, making gentle waves across the pedestrian path.

The scent of jasmine wafted thinly inside the air-conditioned restaurant, cold air chilling the steel cutlery and settling beneath the skin's surface. The young man tugged his sleeves down his forearms

"Are you cold?" his mother asked in her unvarnished Tamil, reaching her hand to his. "Shall we find a different table?"

"No, ma. I'm fine. Are you cold?"

"No, pa. Don't worry about me."

They sat in silence, watching the restaurant fill slowly with the dinner crowd. On this side of Collyer Quay, where temples and pagodas made way for glass towers that reached for their monied gods in the sky, people walked around in athleisure, blogshop jumpsuits and khaki chinos. Glancing about the room, the young man thought of how he had once also worn that chic "overworked casual." He turned to his mother, dressed in the \$15 pink-and-green punjabi suit she had bought in Tekka when he was five and wore for special occasions.

"Shall we order?" she asked, scanning the digital menu on the table. "Their masala thosai looks good."

"Is that what you'd like, Amma?"

"Yes, let's go with that."

The young man gestured to a waiter and they each placed their orders. The waiter nodded politely and left.

The young man twisted the cuffs of his sleeves. The wide, polished table made him think of his now empty office desk and the dusty old photography book that he had received as a Secret Santa gift. He felt a churning sensation in his stomach. "Anyway, ma. I wanted to talk to you about something."

His mother's shoulders stiffened. She picked up a fork and wiped the handle with the hem of her blouse.

“Amma is always here for you, pa,” she said, returning the fork to the table before doing the same with a spoon. “The cutlery here is a bit stained. Here, give me yours. I’ll give them a quick wipe.”

The young man saw the way she preoccupied herself with this task, and the words receded from the tip of his tongue.

“Isn’t that Bedok aunty?” the mother asked, looking at a woman a few tables over.

“Who?” the young man frowned.

“Bedok aunty, *lah*. She stayed in the flat opposite us when we lived there. Always happened to have extra food cooked for you whenever Amma was low on cash. I’m sure she’s seen me coming home with just a loaf of Gardenia bread too many times. Maybe you’re too young to remember.”

“Oh, yes. I think so.”

“I’m just going to say hello to her. Been so long! Give me five minutes, ok?” The mother rose from her seat and went towards the woman.

The young man waited, gazing out the glass window. A group of young office workers passed the restaurant on their way to the MRT station. The bright notes of their laughter filtered through the glass.

“So nice to see aunty again,” the mother gushed as she returned to her seat several minutes later. “She still remembers you, you know? How you never did anything unless you asked Amma’s permission first. I told her you’re a big manager at Google now. She was so impressed.” Her eyes shone then, as though she was looking across at a cast and gilded version of her son.

The young man shifted in his seat, worrying at his cuffs. He realized he had worn this exact shirt three days in a row, and wondered if his mother had noticed his blunder. The churning in his stomach returned.

“So, Amma, about that...”

The waiter arrived with their food, setting the heaped silver plates and tumblers down in front of them. The thosais looked crispy and brown, their masala filling soft and golden.

“Looks good, huh? Actually, no need for this cutlery. I will use my hands,” said the mother.

The young man tore off a piece of thosai with his fingers and dipped it into a small vessel of sambar before lifting it to his mouth. He chewed pensively for a few moments and swallowed.

“I’m glad we have this time today, Amma. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something important,” he said.

The mother said nothing as she ate, a small frown creasing her forehead.

The young man exhaled slowly, wishing that happiness alone could be a good enough reason for the Ammas and Bedok Auntys of the world.

“About my job, I decided to — ”

“Does this masala taste off to you?” asked the mother suddenly.

“Er— no, not really.”

The mother grimaced and shook her head as she chewed. “Something is definitely off. I don’t think they used the right ingredients.”

The young man opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it again. “It doesn’t really bother me, Amma,” he said quietly.

“Something is wrong, pa,” said the mother. “I think they didn’t use ghee. You should always use ghee when making thosai, not oil. Otherwise it won’t be crispy. And the amount of flour, rice and urad dal should be right. If not, the thosai will end up too thick and won’t cook properly.

“And this masala tastes like sand,” she continued. “Soft in some parts, rough in others. The onion and ginger pieces are dry and big like stones. The podi is coarse and doesn’t go well at all. Everything should feel the same. It should be the same.”

“Maybe this is just how this restaurant prepares it, ma,” the young man offered, his shoulders rigid as he poked at a bit of potato.

“Masala thosai is masala thosai,” the mother said. “There’s only one way to make it.”

“How can you be so sure of that, ma?” asked the young man. “What if they wanted to try something different? Maybe their customers were sick of the same old masala thosai.”

“Then their heads are twisted on wrong.”

“You can’t say that, ma.” The young man hesitated. He sampled the words carefully on his tongue before he said them. “Look around this restaurant, Amma. How many of these people can say they’re truly happy? They’re doing the same old thing again and again, aren’t they? What happens when they get restless and want something new, and they’re willing to do anything for that feeling, even if it isn’t what everyone else expects of them? That’s exactly what I told my boss when I— ”

“Why are you overreacting?” his mother snapped. “And don’t tell me what I can or cannot say.” Her face was tight and drawn, her tone final.

The young man slumped back in his chair, his hands falling open on his lap.

Courage pulled him in two different directions. One was towards a fragile sense of duty. Amma had given everything to raise and educate him, to ensure he had the same opportunities growing up as other children. Through sacrifices and sheer force of will, she had helped him to

“reach the shore” as she liked to say in Tamil. *Karai saethuten*. But while she was not yet ready to see those multitudes that sifted and stirred within him, he saw the emotions that brimmed in her eyes; the pride, the joy, the solace that evaded women like her for far too long, and even if they were for a part of himself she did not yet know and could not yet accept, he wanted to guard them for as long as he could.

The other led to the truth. A truth that lurked in his slowly dwindling bank account, in the shirts that now hung untouched for weeks in his wardrobe, but also as something exhilarating and limitless that stretched out beneath his feet, and perhaps for the first time in his life, something that was purely his own.

The churning in his stomach quietened. The young man looked at the unfinished thosai in front of him and pushed the plate aside.

“Amma,” he said, straightening up in his seat. “I think I want idli sambar instead.”

His mother gave him a skeptical look. “Are you sure? You like idli sambar?”

The young man smiled to himself. “It’s actually my favourite food, Amma.”

“Oh. Really?” said his mother, regarding him with wide, questioning eyes. “I thought masala thosai was your favourite.”

“*Your* favourite, Amma. Not mine.”

She hesitated then and her expression softened. “Why didn’t you tell me, pa? I would have cooked it more at home.”

The young man shrugged. “I’m telling you now.”

His mother said nothing for several long moments. When she spoke again, her voice took the shape of something new. “As long as you’re sure it’s what you want, pa. Amma doesn’t want you to be unhappy.”

“Yes, ma. I’m very sure.”

She nodded slowly. “Then order the idli sambar. But don’t come crying to me if it tastes as bad as this thosai,” she added with a wry smile.

The young man suppressed a chuckle, shaking his head.

Outside, night had come. Cloud and sky became one. As the young man gazed out the glass window, he caught his mother in its reflection, her silhouette golden in the room’s warm light.

Diwali

Akash Mattupalli

“What’s Diwali?” my roommate asks,
I had just told him that I don’t celebrate Christmas.
“It’s the Festival of Lights,” I say, pretending to be a Wikipedia article.
“celebrated by Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists that lasts five days.”
maybe AP World History didn’t teach him that.

Do I tell him of the arches of peacocks and oil lamps in the streets of Singapore,
or the times I held onto Mother’s hand walking through the bazaars in Little India,
being pushed about by parents and children alike,
eyes shimmering at the jalebis, halwas and burfis displayed,
backs aching from carrying red plastic bags filled with sparklers back home?

Do I tell him of the Indian classical dance performances my school organised,
my Chinese classmates chuckling at a Carnatic note being sung,
just because it sounded like the word for breasts to the locals?
They were the same classmates who asked
why I was eating chapati with my dirty hands,
the same classmates who said they couldn’t see me
once the lights were switched off.

Maybe I could tell him of how beautiful Mother looked
in her red sari on Diwali, gold veins that ran through the fabric,
twinkling with her chandelier earrings and the oil lamps in our house,
or of the aroma of coconut laddoos that lingered for many days to come,
the intricate flower arrangements of marigolds, roses and tulips outside our house,
or of the sheer excitement of lighting those sparklers as a kid.

But should I tell him about our parents mouthing us to be quiet
when we were running around with them,
as they warily saw our neighbours' curtains shuffle,
Or how people would never call the police on
the Chinese operas during Hungry Ghost Festival?

Would he have cared anyway,
listening about celebrations from halfway across the world?

food therapy for cold college days

Meghana Vinai

away from family, in a faraway place
that's how it always starts, doesn't it?
first of many days where loneliness lingers
as depths of isolation reach new heights.
it's never something you can prepare for,
no matter how much you anticipate the hunger
for familiarity, for friendly faces, for home.

everyone's rite of passage into adulthood.

all aunties and uncles say it'll be rough,
"It'll get cold in the winter weather."
"Wrap up warm, hoard many jackets."
they nag yet no one ever says,
"Don't forget to pack your lunches."

amma diligently does them at home:
warm rice and lentils always ready to go.
never had you thought you'd miss the stench
of coarse hot peppers and masala drenched in oil.

you expected the cold weather, the new people, the empty places
the weird seasons that you'd never weathered before.
you packed for the school classes,
prepared for the financial burdens of

existing, surviving, thriving abroad -

yet no one mentioned the anguish
of missing
home.

when the days end abruptly, shops close before dark,
as the outside world collapses on the little fort you made,
no one mentioned the yearning for that sense of belonging,
that nebulous incomprehensible connection that you'd never lacked then.

the conviction, your *raison d'etre*.

it creeps in slowly through the losses,
of a routine that no longer persists,
a mother tongue you no longer speak echoing only in songs,
or a few calls back and forth across day and night -
they're never enough anymore.

it festers in the way there's no nearby temple,
no solace,
to meet wandering souls like you in this
alien unforgiving space,
no remnants left but a sole reminder of home,
the only one you can carve out on your own

through the masala chais attempted repeatedly,

failed curries for store-bought frozen chapatis,
spices stacked haphazardly in jars,
Tamil labels stuck over English wrappers,

rice cookers never used well,
rough-estimating turmeric, cloves and basil,
A.R. Rahman wafting through speakers,
as you try to recreate a moment you'd never had before

you dance and scrape across worn out tiles,
humming '90s songs you'd almost forgotten,
solitude gives way to the knowledge of
every other indian kid who'd been in your shoes before.

you pick apart every recipe
recreating it in your own likening
messing it up as you go,
you realize what you need.

WhatsApp video calls connecting
kitchen to kitchen,
college dorm to family home
voices shouting affectionately –
the only warmth that drives away
the coldness
of those lonely college days.

What To Do When Your Girlfriend Is In Love With Birds

Roohi Ghelani

“The dollarbird chick has fledged!”
she exclaims and you put aside your tiredness,
to bring her to Birdcage Avenue

You’re cranky, frustrated, struggling in the heat
but she looks up at the new fledgling
waiting for its mother to return with food
camera always ready, never tiring
with the same patience she keeps for her parents –
fledglings navigating their first unsteady steps
as parents of a brown queer woman

She fell in love with birds
the moment she saw a mallard duck in Hamburg,
throwing herself into ornithology
until she could recognise a bird by its call
The same way she did with you –
learning all your habits and idiosyncrasies
until she could recognise even the slightest shifts
and know instantly what mood you were in

She keeps a list for the birds
a meticulous log of all the species,
84 now with the Pied Imperial-Pigeon at Dairy Farm!
The same way she did with you –

A Google doc full of lists
Dates you've been on (149 at last count!)
musicals she wants to introduce you to
right down to future proposal ideas

She talks excitedly about the parakeets and
the cacophony of their calls as they return to their nests
You notice a glimmer of wistfulness
and catch her yearning
to build a nest of her own, yet
knowing that it's out of reach until
she migrates out of this little island
like the birds she holds so dear

So, what do you do when
your girlfriend is in love with birds?
You wait in the heat with her,
ask if she needs water, or a snack,
and be grateful she loves you
with the same steadfastness and passion
with which she loves birds

If looking is loving then gazing is grieving

Kiran Kaur Dhaliwal

sometimes at 4am i watch rekha's interviews online and wonder what a woman she must have been to have lived a life so elephantine a peculiarity we are not truly intimate with until she talks about being so giddy for someone who will never love her with the largeness that even the tiniest pore on her skin is capable of i become undone to her unabashed orbs lined with kajal mouth marooned as she waits

*mujhe tum nazār se gira tob rabe ho
mujhe tum kabhi bhi bhula na sakoge*

she teaches me that sweetness comes not from the pomegranate but parting lips dripped in the molasses of hunger which break out into a soft stern serenade for only us reminding the naysayers that it is us who choose, us who venerate, we are like the sun lending its gleam to the pockmarked moon we who make our affection of an object venerable solely on the merit of our worship, the lingering satisfaction of housing an ache

Note:

The poem is a golden shovel poem that utilises words from Lucille Clifton's poem 'birth-day' – "what we will become/waits in us like an ache."

Dead Tongue

Tarini Tilve

At thirteen I stood in front of a mirror and mouthed the words slowly for the first time.

Zen-uh-foh-bee-uh. Tongue bent, cramped behind a wall of teeth. None of its usual twists and twirls, just a foreign awkwardness as it stumbled around my mouth.

Days later, I heard the voice use her tongue when we had a talk in class about bullying. I walked up to the teacher's desk, weighed down by a heavy book and heart. I stroked my finger up and down the spine, tracing the letters.

"Stay back after class," my teacher said.

Kyu?

Okay, I tell him.

"I wanted to talk to you about your classmates. I know you're always alone in class, that they don't like you. I see the bruises on your knees. I see the pictures and texts online."

Kuch karte kyu nahi?

I stay silent.

"It's because they are xenophobic. Do you know what that is?"

No.

"They are scared of foreigners."

I am not a foreigner.

"You are."

Tob kya hua? Tum kuch kehti kyu nahi?

Quiet, I tell her.

Quiet, quiet, she mocks.

I look at my teacher and all I see are his lips moving. I can't listen, it's too loud in my head with both of us there. I wonder if he hears a voice in his head like mine. I wonder if it hates him as much as mine does. I wonder if his tongue is as faulty as mine.

A foreign thing that wouldn't say the words right. I had to get rid of it.

So at thirteen I stood in front of the mirror and stared at my tongue, with all its grooves and the indents from my teeth printed onto it. I saw its strong veins, its energy as it hummed, this once graceful acrobat that had been reduced to a fumbling, awkward creature. My fingers trembled as I held up two fingers like a pair of tweezers and grasped at it. I closed my eyes and counted:

One, two, three then slashed through the taut bands of tissue and muscle.

Like biting down on squid, I thought as I cut through cords of tension that stretched then snapped. Blood spurted through my mouth, heavy and sticky, dripping down my throat and seeping into the passage. I was beyond screams. I heard nothing. And then, there was a rattling sound coming from somewhere. It was coming from inside me as my throat struggled to clear the blood that coated it. Above me, in the sink, my tongue wiggled and thrashed. I felt its movements mirrored inside my mouth.

All that was left inside my mouth was a stump, one that would grow into a better tongue. For a while it did, and I spoke with it and I ate with it and I drank with it. Yet I still felt the ghost of the old one inside me, still tasted that stale blood when I closed my eyes, still felt the severed phantom tendons of the old wrapping around the new. The bog of decay festered, mutated. It ate through my new tongue, and I watched what was new curl up and rot, rot, rot away into nothing.

It was heavy, this dead tongue and with it there I could hear her all over again. Terrible voice, it left me with no respite. She grew louder when I was around the others, she wanted them to hear her. They knew something was wrong with me. When I reached into my bag and ate from my lunchbox filled with large rice-like yellow flakes, all they did was stare. How could they understand the relief this food gave me? Or that nothing was more wretched than when I spoke in front of my parents, the tongue stumbling down unfamiliar but not unknown words. At that moment my tongue felt alive and light, like a weight lifting after every word only to come crashing down again. It did not matter. They shuddered when they saw the rotting stump undulate as I tried to speak. Wretched thing, they thought, to move in this unnatural way.

There is a tale of a god that accidentally eats mud as a child. His mother scolds and commands him to open his mouth. She watches in awe as she sees the entire universe encompassed inside. There is nothing inside my mouth. I think that's what scares them, to stare into an endless abyss devoid of that which roots the body to the outside world.

She grows louder now still. I walk to the mirror again and stare at my own reflection, my hands trembling again in anticipation.

Look at me, I tell her. In my mind I picture another version of myself, staring back at me with blank, liquid eyes and the smile you give a petulant child that doesn't know any better. Waiting for the day it will learn its lesson.

Hamesha yaha.

Then I raise my knife. I bring it down onto my outstretched rotting tongue, forcing my eyes to remain open. I will do this as many times as it takes to get the right tongue. Hot liquid pools into my cheeks, a mix of blood and tears. My hands falter and the knife lands wrong, leaving slits in the butchered flesh. There are strands of flesh hanging from it, and blood spews from the gaps I leave behind. It drips down my neck, staining my clothes. Throughout it all, I keep my eyes locked on the ones in the mirror. Still, I hear her voice even as I feel blood gurgling again in my throat, drowning me.

Hamesha yaha.

I take a deep breath and with a final slash, the tongue detaches again, flailing around pathetically. I grin down at it, revealing two rows of bloody teeth. Silence. Blessed silence, I think but then I see it make another attempt to move, with the last vestiges of its energy. Then, I hear her again.

Hamesha yaha.

Forever here.

Number One

Anusha K

“You need to do better than them,” Appa always said, referring to the ones lucky enough to be born with the right skin. “You need to work twice as hard just to get the same recognition,” was his advice.

Amma only echoed the harshness of his words. “What to do? It’s our karma,” she used to say with a sigh. “You need to be number one. Only then will they have no choice but to recognise you. If not, they will just go with their own.” Their advice had been drilled into her from young – so much that it had fused into her very identity.

Her name was the first strike that life dealt her. Never mind that she was named after the most powerful Hindu goddess of all, the Mother Goddess of Power, Strength, and Punishment of Evil. “Sri Durgadevi” stuck out like a sore thumb, reminding everyone (including herself) that she was not one of *them*.

Her strong disinterest in the hard sciences and mathematics was the second strike. So what if she was artistically inclined, with a natural creative spark? According to Amma and Appa, she needed a career in Law, Medicine or Accounting if she had any hopes of breaking out of the middle-class income ceiling.

Then there was the third strike, which had stayed precariously hidden till puberty hit her squarely in her teens. She discovered that, like many women in her family, she too was predisposed to wide, curvy hips and thighs. They emerged seemingly out of nowhere, curve upon curve of lumpy flesh that clung to her bones. While the *others* flaunted svelte figures with long, straight limbs, her own womanhood erupted in an undeniable pear-shaped silhouette.

Still she trudged on, despite her apparent shortcomings.

The first strike was the easiest to deal with. Sri Durgadevi was duly shortened to Vee. Not Sri, not Devi and certainly not Durga. Just Vee. Short, simple and ambiguous.

The second strike required more effort, but the constant close supervision of Amma and Appa ensured that she was consistently the top scorer in her class. Nevermind that her grade for Tamil

was slipping, because she hardly spoke it (she had even started replying in English to Amma at home). Her grades for Mathematics, Science and General Paper mattered the most for university admissions, and Amma, Appa and Durga herself saw to it that she scored well enough to enter law school on a government scholarship.

The third strike was the hardest to deal with. She tried her best – she really did. She was in her teens when she went on her first-ever exercise regime. When she hit the inevitable plateau, she cut her calories, carbs, and fat intake till she was utterly hungry and miserable. The curves became firmer and a little less jiggy, but they refused to budge. “You look good, *lah*. Like Beyonce!” often said her best friend Lydia Lee, who had a 21-inch waist and perfect chopstick legs, long and impossibly slim.

The one thing she had going for her in the looks department, apparently, was the shade of her skin. According to Amma, while she was not lucky enough to be born with the right skin, she at least had the fortune of resembling very pale, milky chai. “Put your photo on your resume. It will help,” Amma would say.

Amma and Appa’s quest for her to be number one was well underway.

She graduated cumma sum laude and accepted a job offer at a prestigious law firm. She had a generous starting salary and allowance, more than enough to give Amma and Appa a nice treat. “Sri Durgadevi, Legal Associate”, looked impressive on her namecard. Her colleagues and clients called her Vee, but her full name was read out in court in all its glory. Her mentor – the law firm’s Caucasian partner – told her it had gravitas, when she explained its meaning to him.

She had done everything right, hadn’t she? She had changed her name. She had beat them fair and square in every single exam. She was still beating them in the courtroom regularly. She was fair-skinned, even fairer than some of them, especially the ones who liked to go tanning at Tanjong Beach Club on the weekends. She had managed to maintain a stable, respectable weight for the past five years. She had not had a single grain of rice in the past six months, not even when Amma made her famous mutton curry with her secret spice mix and delicious aromatic ghee. She even wore Spanx, for goodness’ sake, to keep it all in.

Everything would finally be okay. No more hiding her name, no more cramming for exams she didn’t care about, no more being ashamed of her hips. No more worrying that she wasn’t good enough. She could relax now, couldn’t she?

But she couldn't relax. *They* were still there. They surrounded her at every turn, waiting to swoop in and take over. The higher she climbed, the bigger of a threat she became. She experienced it at every turn. In the office, when they would laugh at their inside jokes in a language they knew she couldn't understand, even though they all spoke perfect Queen's English in the courtroom. During lunchtime, when they deftly delegated her to the "foreign talent" group, together with the newly-immigrated Indian lawyers. Even at after-work drinks, when they joked about her curves. Did she know Kim Kardashian was training to be a lawyer? Yes, she did. She knew all about it and she knew that "real" lawyers weren't supposed to flaunt Kim K hips, even if they were born with them.

It was starting to take its toll on her. The perfect life Amma and Appa had promised seemed further away than ever. If only she could be number one. Then they would have no choice but to recognise her. But *how* could she be number one? Was it even possible? What else would it take?

She was at lunch with Lydia Lee one day, both of them hungering for a much-needed comfort meal after an exceptionally tedious day in court, when the unlikely solution presented itself.

"Eh, you remember the curry murder case? The one where they killed the guy and cooked him in curry?" asked Lydia, carefully carrying two heaping plates of mutton briyani to their table.

"Yah, what about it?" asked Vee, following closely behind, cradling a bowl of curry in her hands. The aroma of ground spices and piquant chillies was making her mouth water.

"I can't cook curry. But I can make bak kut teh," said Lydia ominously as they both sat down.

Vee shrugged, ladling a generous serving of curry onto her plate. The thick red gravy cascaded over her rice, engulfing it like red lava. She took a big spoonful and swallowed, relishing the way the curry burned the insides of her mouth and throat. She washed it down with a swig of ice-cold lime juice. The combination was exquisite, hot and savoury one minute, sweet and sour the next. She smacked her lips in satisfaction and reached for another sip.

"You think I could get away with a bak kut teh murder?"

Vee sputtered, spraying lime juice everywhere.

"I can't stand it!" Lydia exclaimed. "We're clearly the best team in the firm. Why are Mei Xin and Dennis getting promoted instead?"

Vee said nothing. She took another mouthful of briyani – it was so delicious, the rice fluffy and aromatic with ghee, sprinkled with crispy fried shallots. Her mind wandered, to the vultures at their office. She could think of a couple of reasons as to why they were being passed over for the promotion. Mei Xin’s father was a good friend of one of the firm’s partners, and Dennis – well, Dennis was just Dennis, a bulldozer if there ever was one. He had made it clear from day one that he would have his way, at any cost.

Of course, there was the matter of her skin. But that was something you didn’t say out loud, even if you knew everyone else was thinking it, too. She tried to imagine what it would be like to get *them* out of the way, once and for all...

“We’d need a huge pot to fit them all in,” Lydia was saying.

“Pot for what?”

“For our bak kut teh!” Lydia poked her with her elbow. “Pay attention, Vee!”

Vee chuckled. “You know, I’ve never actually tried bak kut teh,” she said, watching as the other girl carefully drizzled a spoonful of curry over her own rice before taking a small bite. The reaction was almost instantaneous – her face flushed red and tiny beads of sweat started forming on her forehead.

“Careful,” laughed Vee. “Don’t burn yourself.”

“I don’t know how you do it,” said Lydia, gesturing at her friend’s plate. “And I can’t believe you haven’t had bak kut teh!”

Vee shrugged. “Just never craved it.”

“*Ooh*, you’re missing out! I’ll bring you to my favourite place. They do a peppery style, it’s not spicy like this but I know you’ll love it –”

“Should I take notes? For our epic crime?” joked Vee, taking another gulp of the freshly squeezed lime juice. It was so refreshing – she wondered why she didn’t drink it more often. The calories were worth it, surely.

“It’s a pretty good idea if you think about it,” Lydia argued.

“One DNA test, and it’s all over,” said Vee dryly. “But you’re right, we’ll be famous. Number one partners-in-crime. They’ll write books about us, study about us in law school...”

“Dedicate an entire *Crime Watch* episode to us,” giggled Lydia.

Vee threw her head back and laughed. “Hey – maybe we should spare Mei Xin and Dennis. Make them represent us instead. What do you think?”

“Oh, it would *kill* them to defend us,” squealed Lydia.

“There you go,” said Vee. “The crime of the century, inspired by the humble bak kut teh.”

“OK, now you *have* to try it. Let’s go this weekend, once we’re done with this mess.” Lydia was referring to their ongoing court case.

Vee nodded. “Just promise me one thing,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“No more murder plots, please.” She grinned.

Contributors

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Yvonne likes to observe the things people don't say, as much as the things they do. Words have always been her escape and a way to make sense of people, emotions and relationships. Her short stories have previously been published in Mahogany Journal and Open Minds Quarterly.

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Kiran is a Singaporean-Sikh poet. An alumna of REWRITE London, a creative writing collective, she is currently working on a poetry-memoir hybrid. Her work has been published in Hyades Magazine and previous issues of Mahogany journal. When not mulling over words, she can be found holding one-woman concerts in her room or sleeping.

Roohi Ghelani



Roohi is a climate change consultant and supports companies with their climate action and strategies. She enjoys being in nature, hiking and scuba diving. In her free time she also enjoys boxing, and has recently been trying her hand at stand up comedy. Roohi occasionally writes poems when she is feeling inspired by love, life and/or nature.

Anusha K



Anusha is a freelance copywriter who spends her days writing for others and her nights writing for herself. She is currently working on a series of short stories exploring human consciousness and desires.

Subash Kumar



Subash, 25, is a full-time baker, part-time studying English Language and Literature, and the founder of fud.sg – an online food platform aiming to help those who are willing to explore the culinary world improve their food literacy. Through his work in fud.sg, he hopes that people can meet, exchange ideas and enjoy one another's company through their shared love for food.

Akash Mattupalli



Currently pursuing Mechanical Engineering at Purdue University, Akash started to write at 15 to get into grips with his identity. Now living in the US, he has also lived in India, Singapore, England and Saudi Arabia. Through his work, he hopes to reflect on the environments he grew up in while understanding who he is.

Tarini Tilve



Tarini is currently pursuing a degree in English at Nanyang Technological University. She has a newly-found, keen interest in diasporic work and looks forward to exploring this space. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, writing and listening to musicals. Her most unpopular opinion is that she does not like Upma.

Meghana Vinai



Meghana is a practicing storyteller, who has experience in the medium of film, theatre, music and dance. She's currently attempting to write her stories & poetry while juggling a full-time career in the entertainment world. Constantly surrounded by chaos, she translates the cacophonies of daily life into her experimental, 'out-of-the-box' works. She has as many nicknames as she does half-finished projects.