
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Aruni Wijesinghe: Four Poems

Aruni Wijesinghe · Thursday, October 6th, 2022

The Mount Lavinia Hotel, Colombo

my history begins
with the echo of betel leaves
falling on teak floorboards

shadows of wedding guests
dissolve to smoke
with the push of the ballroom door

*

A Friendly Ghost

I find my costume at Tip-Top Stationers,
smiling mask gazing up at me
through the cellophane window. I hug the box
to my chest, carry it to the register.
On the car ride home, Casper rests
on the seat next to me,
promises the best candy haul ever.

The night of Halloween, I climb
into a new self. Nylon skin whispers
against my corduroy pants and turtleneck,
envelops me in phantasm. I fit his face
over mine, try on whiteness for the first time.
I feel the power of anonymity, blend
into the river of trick-or-treaters,
at last invisible.

This year, I don't beg
for candy. I ring doorbells,
plant my sneakers on every porch,
demand the sweetness due me.

*

Flight Paths, or how tall is a bag of basmati rice

The door to the pantry is painted white,
 brush marks mimicking woodgrain,
 the occasional hair from the brush embedded
 in the surface like a whisker or a bristle of foxtail
 carried in from the schoolyard on the arm
 of a coat. Along the door jamb are pencil marks,
 temperatures etched on a thermometer.
 Each mark bears a name and an age.
Manik, age three, Ashini, age four,
Aruni, age six. The marks start
 near the lower shelves where rice
 is stored in twenty-pound zippered sacks,
 so many slouching pillow cases. Each year we inch
 upwards, past the Froot Loops
 and Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, past
 glass bottles of Taster's Choice and Néscafe
 now filled with roasted curry powder,
 turmeric, and pale green cardamom pods.
 Hash marks race to the top of the doorway,
 charting our flights.

*

Engagement Party

Aunty Rani is nurse at Bronx-Lebanon
 with *Ammi* and *Thaaththi*, another foreigner
 recruited by the hospital. When her marriage
 to a physician in India is arranged, she hosts a party
 to celebrate her engagement. She pins a snapshot
 of the groom who becomes our Uncle Rana
 to the shoulder of her sari
 where the jeweled pallu falls away.

She leaves New York a bride and returns
 a new wife. Her wedding bangles tinkle
 with each gesture, the sindoor in her hair
 vivid as blood.

The rhythm of their family pulses in the hallways,
 perfume of cumin and corriander seeping
 from under the door. Like *Ammi* and *Thaaththi*,
 they add American children to the nation
 and add South Asian values to the children
 so that we all hold two countries.

Eventually they move to Abilene, Texas,

become Kodak snapshots
tucked into yearly holiday cards.

But on the night of the engagement party,
she is beautiful Aunty Rani, laughing, full of hope
for the future she will fly to India to meet.

*



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