

# 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 Néscafé  
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 coriander 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 Aunt Rani, laughing, full of hope  
for the future she will fly to India to meet.

\*



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