

[on being the only Indian family in a small suburb in Pennsylvania]

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i. Water

I learned Hindi before English.

Once, I asked for *paani* at daycare and
my teacher asked for a meeting with my parents.

“It’s a developmental thing,” she said.

“It’s a language thing,” they replied.

A week later, I asked for water when I was thirsty and
my teacher asked me, “Which cup, red or blue?”

When my mother’s tongue spoke mother-tongue to me,

I understood, yet

Hindi had spilled from my own mouth
like water from the two-hand grasp of a too-full glass.

I caught it on the tip of my tongue but
the words had already dried up,

jolted hesitations

flooding the

gaps

between the

syllables

with

streams of

pebbled

commas.

I learned to speak English slowly,

so my grandparents could understand,

so I didn’t have to attempt to recall gestures

my lips had forgotten years ago.

I learned to pretend Indian was a language,

to pretend I knew it,

to pretend I didn’t.

I learned, too late, the magnitude of this loss,

this dried riverbed I can’t mourn anymore—

so I learned to write poems about India in English and
pray for monsoon.

ii. Warmth

I was seventeen when my mom told me
she'd found trash in our mailbox.
Six days after we'd moved in
to a house crayoned in raw sienna,
where a wooden picket fence
hemmed the grass in the backyard.
We were the only house on the street
with a fence.
How fitting, then,
that we were also the only house on the street
with brown siding.

She said I was almost two,
probably playing inside.
Instead of bills and the Ladies Home Journals
we never subscribed to,
she found crumpled wrappers and wet paper;
browning flowers ripped from the earth,
dirt still grasping at their roots;
blades of grass folded between soggy envelopes like knives,
serrated edges sawing through the invisible cord
that tethered us to a colorful world oceans away;
and a plastic bottle,
filled with something dead.
It reeked of spit and fear,
an acrid mist that burned
in her throat.

Without telling anyone,
she cleaned up the mess.
Called the police
only after the black metal
didn't smell like [racism] anymore.

We lived there for ten years afterward.
When we moved out,
the new owners painted the house
white.

In a small suburb in southern Pennsylvania,
where giggles rose like bubbles from birthday parties we weren't invited to;
where Halloween was the only day we knocked on our neighbors' doors;
where we made *samosas* from scratch and drenched the house in fried spices
because the only Indian store near our house
always left the dough too soft and the potatoes too hard;
where we watched Bollywood in the basement and Disney in the living room,
kept the Hindi from the Hollywood
and the volume just high enough to hear over
our dancing feet;
where we played *Holi* on the small patio in the back,
even though there was more space on the driveway
to throw water balloons and colors so dizzyingly bright
they muted the sun, just for a moment;
where we stocked the freezer with *mithai* from the summer—
defrosted it to relive the sugar in the winter;
where my sister and I chased each other on the green silk the fence kept down,
pretended we were pirates and pilots and poured
our imaginations into worlds only we would ever know;
my parents brought India
home.

In the only brown house on our street,
my sister and I wore *lehengas*
sent by faraway relatives
on the landing above the stairs.
Reflections blooming like marigolds
in the black TV behind us,
mirror-work glinting in our eyes,
tiny bells singing from folds in the fabric,
we posed for pictures
to send across the Atlantic.
Hosted award shows and modeled
with pajama shirts tucked into heavy skirts,
practicing for a rare Grand Indian Wedding
of an aunt or uncle or cousin we barely knew—
just to get one wear out of the glittering chiffon
before we outgrew it.

In the only brown house on our street,
we celebrated *Diwali*
with friends from New Jersey.
Incense in whirls of sandalwood smoke
scampered into the warmth of cloves and cardamom,
stained sunset by saffron and turmeric.
We lit every candle we could find;
we hung strands of tiny light bulbs
around the banister and across the roof—
kept them up until December
and called them Christmas lights.
Twirling inside billowing cotton,
we waited by the window
for glowing headlights and chiming bangles.
Counted to five after the bell rang
to curb our excitement,
opened the door, and
evening air shattered into fractals of light.
Aunties draped in elegant *saris*,
light blue silk rippling like soft waves
beneath dark winter coats,
uncles in jeans holding bottles of wine,
kids with t-shirts stuffed under *kurtas* and blouses,
patterned puffer jackets already halfway off,
composing a familiar lullaby of distorted jingles
and swelling conversations.
The night sky patched itself up
behind the closed door.

Within the brown picket fence
of the only brown house on our street
my parents taught me
India.