

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

Siddharth Katragadda

The Second Heart Attack

Each dark room, an undying reminder of a failed generation. Three boys and three girls grew up in them, playing around their great father, while he recited poetry to a young woman who came at five each morning, sat at his feet and wrote down his mutterings, word for word. Then, one day it happened. Like a cyclone from the Bay of Bengal, it turned their colorful house into a still black-and-white picture. The only thing of color that remained was the paan-red bougainvillea tree that crept up their patio wall in a trellised canopy of vines, its flowers, a splash of blood that had been stilled in its splatter, for eternity. They were in the living room when the oldest boy, onto whose shoulders the onus of their failed generation would fall, rushed into the room from his father's study. His expression would be stilled in their memories like scenes from old films, black and white images that remain for a lifetime, trapped in an organ that washes off all pigments and retains no color. What remains would fade with time. They all rushed to see what it was. Their father lay on the floor, his head on the rosewood desk, a frown written between his eyes, his pain carved in merciless lines on his face, evidence that his brain had acknowledged the approach of death. An inkpot dripped dark, blue ink over its sides, onto the floor. The gramophone tugged relentlessly on the last track of a record, the ending line of a film song repeating again and again in a voice that seemed stretched like a rubber-band.

That single incident changed all their lives at a time when they did not believe that any single event in their lives could have such an altering effect. The study was locked and bolted. The rooms fell dark and silent. Their mother, in the midst of six children, gave up living, sat by the window fanning herself in the summer heat, peering out the meshed windows at the rotting Morris Minor that her husband used to drive, six children in the back, to Gandipet Lake, each weekend.

For two generations, their house had been a place where artists came and went at will, like flame-moths drawn to a kerosene lamp. A rich, famous house. Then, with one swish of the fate hand, everything disappeared and all that was left were six children, and a mother who willed not to live. The new generation was doomed to fail.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

The Blue Krishna

As kids, my bothers and I would climb to the top of the tall green gate and use its heavy rusted iron bolt to grind seed with. What we used the seed for, I don't quiet remember. It is too far back for something so trivial.

What is not trivial, something so permanent in the mind's eye, something I would never have to go back for, was the view on the other side, visible only from atop the gate.

One day, we got to the top, scratching our knees along the way, and peeped over the wall. Nothing stirred there but for a blue mynah that sat on the carefully laid garden and cooed some nature-orchestrated song to the hot, windless summer afternoon. A fountain stood in the middle of the garden, dried up, veiled in a blanket of leaf-green moss, shriveled creepers crawling all over it. A statue of Lord Krishna danced in the middle, playing his flute to invisible cows that seemed to materialize in our vision, a soft song rising in the air. He had skin the color of the cloudless azure sky above. Wasn't he dark skinned? Why the blue? Was it euphemism, in a land where to have dark skin was to be a sinner in a previous life, a way of repaying the curses of your karma.

The unmoving smile etched on Krishna's face lit up in our eyes as we watched, the fountain springing to life around the statue.

We fell back, onto the patio.

On holi day, when we tired ourselves by spraying colored water on each other until our bodies glimmered in all shades of rosy twilights and slategreen, and our shirts clung to our bodies, our privates, wet and cold from the dampness - multicolored, for that was where the colors collected, we were struck by an idea.

We climbed the gate to the top of the wall, got onto the other side. Lord Krishna watched us intently. We rubbed color into the palms of our hands and stepped forward, our hearts beating like Shiva's dholak in our chests.

We aimed our water pistols filled with color at him, and four away, distance enough for our little bare feet, if we needed to scoot, we let out a scream and shot our pistols. The colored water hit the Lord's face. The blue of his skin melted down his body, mixing with the yellow, red and green. In our vision his smile vanished, wiped away by astonishment. Then, it reemerged and regained its stagnancy. We danced and pranced around, clapping joyfully, a silent fear chocking our throats. What if Lord Krishna cursed us for our crime? What if he sent his chakra flying that very moment to take our sinful heads off?

What if we, like him, we cursed with dark skin in our next lives?

Notes:

Holi: festival of color

dholak: Traditional Indian percussion instrument

chakra: A disk with serrations