

Where Narashima comes Down

One of my old friends described the way I missed home as sweet. When I close my eyes my elementary school becomes the warmest, pinkest place on earth. I can taste the stale cotton candy my brother and I probably shouldn't have eaten. Most school years ended with a series of unbearably hot days, when you can feel the heat in your ears and between your thighs as the school day neared its ending. Still, there were moments where we'd catch ourselves under the perfect tree's shade or in a gust of wind as though a train just passed by. My girl scout meetings were held in Kindergarten classrooms and in those days of wrapping the year up we'd have to open the windows to keep our heads up in focus. But the waves of toad croaks would roll in with cool air as another variable as to what could distract eight year old me. Toad croaks still can, very easily. The endings of pink sunsets, when the space in between day and night stares right at you, terrify me. All possibilities are staring at me.

There was one time when I wasn't staring back and the night suddenly appeared. My brother and I went to my school's playground with my great aunt who had visited us from Hyderabad. She helped me go up the slide the wrong way when my brother refused to. At the time it didn't feel like time was passing. We just kept moving. The same routine: go up the small slide, across the wobbly bridge, down the big slide and every now and then, traverse the monkey bars. It seems as if the world, the sun, and the moon passed us. After much protest our aunt took us home. Our school was directly across from us, making the walk about five minutes long and magical at night when we were chasing an indistinguishable kitchen light.

స్వస్తింహ

My mother grew up in the South Indian countryside. She'd walk about two miles to school every day and two miles back. She went to Catholic school but almost everyone there was Hindu. She didn't have plays in her temple and praying to her is as serious now as ever. She would have to travel far to the city to see the newest Telugu movies. Samosas then weren't special but the best she's ever had. Distance was hardly ever a concern. Her house, which sheltered around twenty family members, was vast. The few times she speaks of it a pure and distant smile creeps on her face. I've never been to the house and likely never will. It had a courtyard that was both outside and in. It had no roof in the center so everything would fall through, but there's a floor and it's surrounded by a building. The whole thing, including the empty center was her home. That's what she loved most. *Aangan* is the word for this area in between.

స్వస్తింహ

Khushboo is the restaurant where my family gets their samosas. The name translates to fragrance. It's also my favorite gallery space in the world. There are three woven pieces on the right wall when you walk in. The pieces are folded into glass frames. About 4/5ths of each piece is just a plain weave and the last fifth is the most beautiful embroidery work using that classic Indian tear drop shape, *keri* is one word for it. It means mango. These pieces were handdone. The middle piece is a washed saffron and the two around it are dark grayed greens. There is plastic sequence that somehow reflect the multi colored wallpaper and the ornate sweets that could be tiny houses for *ladoo* (sweet) people to live in. My brother and I used to sculpt little Lord Ganesh deities from orange sweets.

స్వస్తింహ

One street in my hometown is lined with over 56 Indian restaurants. Just one street. A whopping total of three Patel Brothers and countless sari houses begin to fill in the spaces. Then some laundromats and dollar stores, all run by South Asians. Sweet shops and pooja shops. Beauty Salons that also do your mehndi and Halal meat shops. Jewelry stores with costume and real gold. A movie theatre that sells *chai* playing exclusively Bolly and Tollywood. A video store that will never go out of business, because where else can you find old forgotten Telugu films. A few immigrant law offices. Services that mail packages back to Asia or wire money. Two apartment complexes housing new arrivals are walking distance from the train station. The central Jersey street is complete. It's unreal how to close it gets to India before you realize it's not. There's a particular sense of longing on this street that you wouldn't find so easily in the bazaars around *Charminar*.

స్వస్తింహ

The first female Indian doctor was a woman named Anandi Gopal Joshi. I'm fascinated by the person who set up the path that so many Indian girls' parents hope their child follows. She was trained in the U.S. at an all women's college and began working as an obstetrician after returning to India. She had lost her own son shortly after giving birth to him. Joshi died when she was 21 of tuberculosis. Her biography was later written by Caroline Healey Dall. It describes how colorful of a child she was. Yamuna, her birth name, was a favorite of her father's. He loved her wit. The book describes one instance in which she was playing with her dolls. She likened them to the deities the priests would clean every day. She went to her father questioning the authority of man washing the face of god. Her father, delighted, explained that the statues were mere representations, that Yamuna had a choice in where to look for god. Dall describes her observance saying "Anandabai was neither a spiritualist nor a theosophist; but from her earliest childhood she dwelt apart, believed in a spiritual world which was even nearer to her than the world she touched, and held herself always ready to listen to 'occult' voices and accept 'occult' experiences."

స్వస్తింహ

My friend and I would joke about how hairy our arms were, being Indian. We would call each other werewolves. It was always fun to pretend to be something non-human. I was cast as one of the three horses in my religious class's production of the *Samudra Manthan*. We rehearsed in our temple's basement. When we'd look up to the sun during our yoga routines we'd see a dropped ceiling with some missing tiles instead. The walls were white, slowly chipping, and the floors a light gray, unevenly done. The shoddy room matched the horse head I was to wear. It was forcefully made of cardboard and stapled together but you could tell by the paint that the person actually cared. There were multiple layers and the pupils had the littlest details no one in the audience would've been able to see. Our temple had benches that lined the walls; below the seats were small flower details but you really couldn't see them until you got up close. Neither the horse head or the benches could compare to the pujas we'd have. A marble sculpture of Sai Baba would get dressed in his brightest, most festive garb. Rough cotton cloth lined with thin and finely woven ribbon. Aunties would fight over which colors they'd use that week. They'd make massive flower garlands with only the best carnations they could find and put it on him like a bride would her husband. They really loved him. I couldn't. I wasn't devoted enough. The walls weren't as divine as they used to be. I stopped believing after I started school and saw all the other kids wipe off the red or gray *bottus* pinned between their eyebrows. I stopped after enduring my brother's laughter when I spoke of Hanuman as if he was real. I was a horse this year. Horses didn't have to be pious. They didn't have to recite mantras or do bharatanatyam. All horses had to do was violently trollop around stage as though it was a sea of cream being churned into *amrita*, the nectar of immortality. Because that's exactly how the story went.

The day of the performance, nut and milk based sweets could be smelled through the cardboard. Despite that, I really didn't want to be there. I liked the horse head and the audience not being able to see my face. I liked the fact that after this performance summer vacation would begin and religious classes would end. I liked not having to learn stories I thought were filled with false hope.

The *Samudra Manthan*, a hectic scene in my head, does not have a start and end. The way I learned it, everything seemed to be happening at once. I hold my breath thinking about it. I held my breath on stage. I was in between beings trying not to think about the audience or my mother watching. I knew she didn't want me to play a horse. I knew the horses were insignificant when she learned the story. She only could focus on the good but I had to keep thinking "someone has to be the horse." Someone had to play the gods and the demons. I was helping the rest of the class by wearing the pathetic piece of cardboard on my head. I could barely see as the head would rise a little with each stomp. My stomach was churning and a staple came undone. It was slowly piercing my cheek. I was mad at my mother in that moment. I couldn't figure out why I was on stage anymore and why I didn't just stop to fix the horse head. The scene eventually ended and I ran to the bathroom to wipe the small trace of blood the staple pricked.

My mother pinched the smiling cheeks of the female lead in one of the plays when we left. She had a green silk sari and *kumkum* in a perfect circle on her forehead. Her hair was braided long. I was wearing leggings and a t-shirt, both black. I had a bowl haircut because of lice. The next morning, like most, I sat down on the woven straw mat to pray with my mother.

In the story there were *Asuras*, demons, and *Devas*, gods. There was a mountain in the center of the ocean with Lord Shiva's snake, *Vasuki*, brother or *Manasa*, wrapped around it. The *Devas* held the tail and the *Asuras* held the head which slowly poisoned them. And as they churned trying to get the *amrita*, but the *halahala*, poison, came with it. The only part of the scene I can see clearly in my head now, and through the horse head then, was when Lord Shiva was called down in a panic. He decided to drink the poison to save the world. That's why he's depicted as blue. He did it to save the demons, the gods, horses, and people.

స్వస్తింహ

I never spoke to my first art teacher. Once a week for eight years. At first it was my timidity and fear. Later it became how we could communicate. Later it became the right way for me to learn from her. She is this large, fair, and beautiful Bengali woman who laughs a lot. Her hair, although the same color of all the other Indian women, is darker. The *kajal* around her eyes is darker. Her lipstick is more red. Her saris are more colorful. It's all the time she spends with colors that made her this way. She's friends with my mother. We gave her the spare key to our house, if we ever got locked out. The other day my mother thought she left the rice cooker on and in panic called my teacher asking her to check on it. It wasn't on. My teacher just laughed. Sometimes

she would instruct me in Bengali. An issue would arise in the fact that I don't speak Bengali, so I would laugh and pretend I understood.

How she would teach me is by repetition. She would be teaching me to draw an apple. On her chalkboard she'd draw a line and I'd make the same line in my sketchbook. Then she'd draw the next line and I'd follow. So on and so forth until I had an apple. Mine is rich in hesitation and distraction and hers is organic, rich in experience. After eight years that changed. She took pride in how long she could call me her student. I went from apples in crayon to graphite landscapes. Still I never said anything. I wonder how, if not through words, we worked so well together. Something existed in between the two of us that allows me to owe her so much today. I felt guilty I couldn't have that with my mother even with two shared spoken languages.

Munshi is how my teacher would call my name. That's a Bengali pronunciation. I never find issue when other Indians mispronounce my name. I like to create a different person for each name. *Munshi* never speaks and only smiles. *Manasa* is extremely intelligent as that's what the uncle at temple who calls me that insists. *Mansi* is a screw-up who cries too often, that's what my brothers and father call me. *Manasi* is Telugu for "good by heart." My mother always says it right. *Manasi* is a woman who prays.

నృసింహ

Hiranyakashipu was an evil king who forced all his subjects to worship him like a god. He was nearly immortal, which gave him this complex. He had received a boon and asked to never be able to be killed, by man or beast, in day or night, inside or out. Little did he know of the sunsets, homes, towns, people, feelings, colors and so much more in between. One day, Lord Vishnu came down as Narashima, a man-beast hybrid, at dawn, in an *aangan* to kill Hiranyakashipu. We celebrate this in spring as the triumph of good over evil. Lord Vishnu managed to win even while forced in the spaces in between.