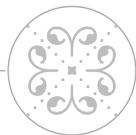


The Story House

AN ESSAY BY

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I was born in America to Indian parents, and the place I'm from is the small, strange country my parents built between the walls of our house in the memory and against the memory of India. From this country I ventured into white, suburban nineties America every day and back, where every point of strangeness—my country's food, manner of dress, religious customs, and concepts of honor and filial piety, not to mention the overwhelming darkness of my limbs and face—grated against the frictionless ways of being white. The dark difference irritated whiteness, and so whiteness pointed out and shamed the difference until the desire to shed it, shed all that was possible to shed, overwhelmed the protective love I felt toward my parents and the customs I used to feel connected to them. It was easier to be American: I chose to be American.

Passively I resisted learning Sanskrit, Bharatanatyam, Karnatik music. I named myself Elizabeth in every game I played, giving myself the blond hair and blue eyes of the good Wakefield twin. I threw away all the lunches my mom packed me even when they were my favorite. I spent entire summers at my best friend Becca's house, becoming fluent in the ways white parents and children spoke to each other, that is, with an exasperation and mutual familiarity that felt almost illicitly comfortable to me. It was easy to be American, but each time I was, I poked a hole in the wall of the house I lived in, willfully destroying it. I felt each American act as an act of betrayal against my parents, whether or not they saw it—only decades later can I see it was an act of betrayal against myself as well. Once the house had so many holes it no longer kept the world out, I kicked through it and stood fully in America:

but I was not white, so America did not want me. Only once the house was gone did I think to miss it.

Still I had stories. Growing up, my parents told me the stories of our gods and ancestors, of their childhoods in Bombay, a place that grew its own lush glamour in my mind, utterly separate from the reality we visited every couple of years, and my father told me stories of his own invention, a dear nonsense of which I have no memory. The only memory is waiting in the dark for him to think up the next thing, demanding impatiently—*then what happens?*—as though it had all already happened and just needed to be remembered instead of pulled, as he did, out of thin air. Words could make a house, I learned then, a place in which to live. Devanagari, the beautiful script of the beautiful language I do not speak, translates to *dwelling of the gods*. It is in my blood then, the knowledge of language's power, where even the divine seek to make their home.

There are books now I come home to, books that speak to that deep place in me, books in which the rhythm of the language sounds exquisitely familiar, if more beautifully articulated than I could ever manage. For most of my life I have lived there, in these books, and I have written stories too, to make small rooms for myself to be alive in. I have written the stories in *A House Is a Body*, all of them, as a map of the possible, as an act of survival. I ask myself *then what happens?* and wait for the answer to come—it is the question that builds the house, sentence by sentence, page by page. I live *here*, in my daily existence, making oatmeal for my daughter, riding my bike, figuring out my taxes. But I live *there* too, in the body on the page that hums with longing, with pleasure. I live in the story as I make it, a doubleness that inflects my life in the oatmeal world too. It is the way I have figured out how to rebuild what I once unwittingly destroyed. It is the only way I understand how to be an American.

It is my hope that my body, my voice, my stories, make more room for yours. I hope I have made a home for you too, with this book, a place in which, for a time, you can live.