

|| masala chai ||

i want to embrace you  
in the way that milk  
fuses with chai<sup>1</sup>,  
bleeding into a single rich color.

for you are the jaggery<sup>2</sup>  
that sweetens the tongue.  
you are the masala<sup>3</sup> that stirs  
trouble and flavor into my world.  
you are the malai<sup>4</sup> that blankets me  
in gentle warmth.  
and the rusk<sup>5</sup> that soaks my love  
with eternal compassion.

i yearn to be the kulhar<sup>6</sup>  
that hugs and holds you together  
when you have no place else to flow.

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<sup>1</sup> chai : “tea” in urdu.

<sup>2</sup> jaggery: a combination of cane sugar and palm sap.

<sup>3</sup> masala: “spice” in urdu.

<sup>4</sup> malai: a heavy type of cream.

<sup>5</sup> rusk: twice baked cake, similar to biscotti.

<sup>6</sup> kulhar: an earthen teacup

|| kizuna<sup>7</sup> ||

could it be?  
that the very water that falls from my sky,  
was once the same water  
that flowed through your river?  
that the very water i have tasted,  
has once crossed your mouth too?

it could be  
that our paths have weaved,  
unraveled,  
and intertwined once again,  
becoming one single thread.  
that a cosmic knot binds our souls together,  
my body having been your body.  
even if no two snowflakes are alike,  
the water they are molded from are of the same.

*yes. it must be*  
that the water that nourishes me,  
and quenches your thirst;  
that enters our bodies as we absorb it,  
is one of the same flow.

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<sup>7</sup> kizuna: a japanese word meaning “interpersonal bond or connection.”

|| patang<sup>8</sup> ||

you light the sky,  
like thousands of kites on festival day.  
children race one another,  
losing their breath as they laugh and tumble.  
sweating as the blazing sun  
makes rhythms upon their backs.  
colors adorn their scarves and ornate clothing  
as they parade to watch you fly.  
every kite a unique design,  
so fragile and gentle  
yet sturdy and tall.  
stretching higher and further  
as everyone marvels at their glory below.

*but you command the sky.*  
your beauty and proximity  
to the heavens is unmatched.

i am the string that keeps you grounded,  
saving you from straying too far away from home,  
yet you said i was holding you back.

however, there are other strings in the sky:  
sharper and longer.  
and they chase after you,  
and now have grown dangerously close.

i tried to tug you closer to me,  
yet you said i was holding you back.  
so you reached even further away  
until our string was taut  
– and with a single sudden touch,  
our connection was snipped.  
and you plummeted towards the earth,  
hoping another string would catch you.

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<sup>8</sup> patang: “kite” in urdu.

but my frayed ends were unable to make new ties,  
and i too drifted away into the distance.

|| half a cup of chai ||

every morning when i would wake up  
there would be half a cup of chai left on the stove.  
my mother would already be at work by now,  
working until her bones ached.  
and although my siblings hated chai,  
my mother made sure  
that her last child was addicted at a young age.

but there it was,  
my favorite part of the day,  
sitting upon the stove.  
the reminder that my mother remembered.  
i know now that she wanted to be there with me,  
but she couldn't.  
she wanted to sit down with me,  
chatting away while dunking cake rusk into our chai  
until it would break off,  
just like she did on the weekends.  
but to a 5-year-old,  
i was just happy to have this cup of chai.  
well half a cup,  
because my mother said i was too young.  
and even though the chai tasted off  
after sitting around and being microwaved again,  
i still drank every last drop because i was so grateful.

as i grew older,  
my mother would always make me the chaiwala<sup>9</sup>  
whenever guests would come over.  
*i hated it.*  
but it gave me years of practice to master the perfect recipe for doodh patti<sup>10</sup>,  
even if it was different from my mother's own recipe:  
i liked masala, she liked peekha<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> chaiwala: one who serves chai.

<sup>10</sup> doodh patti: a heavy milk based chai, cooked for a considerable time.

<sup>11</sup> peekha: "bland" in urdu.

now whenever i brew a pot of chai for myself,  
i think about setting out another mug  
as my mother had done for me.  
but instead, i silently sip  
and savor those memories of the lonely days  
that we could never spend together.  
like i did as a child.

|| zyka<sup>12</sup> ||

growing up, i tried to veil my heritage  
with as much body spray it took to hide  
the smell of spices in my clothing,  
my hair, and my skin.  
so that no one would notice that i didn't fit in,  
or rather smell that i was different.

i would come home as my mother was cooking  
and scurry to my room  
before the oil in the air could sink in.  
slamming the door shut  
and racing for the lavender air freshener,  
to sit in a cloud until dinner was ready.  
and still i ate in my room to avoid not the spices  
but the conversation.

but once i finally left home  
i missed not the meals but the spices:  
the flavors that added authenticity to my falsified life.  
the dishes that my mom prepared so often  
that i thought would be better without this or that  
were not so easy to make after all.  
and local indian restaurants  
just didn't help to fill the void either.

thus i finally accepted that i needed her guidance.  
and i began enjoying the conversations  
where i asked for her recipes  
and complaining when they still turned out subpar.  
now it is those spices that remind me of home,  
my culture, and my heritage.  
and help me to always stay rooted  
to the flavors of being raised as a pakistani man  
living in an american society.  
i will never again shed my foreign skin,

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<sup>12</sup> zyka: "taste" in urdu.

for a forged american skin,  
because now i wear both.

it is because of this journey  
that i spike my chai with spices.  
*to savor the flavors of life.*