

## Mr. Balasubramanian

Up the mossy hill,  
under the whisper of a sycamore limb,  
I climb the fissures

of a winding tar road  
on Library Drive  
in Chapel Hill.

I walk by the parking lot,  
through flickering bushes  
and nodding trees,

past the mahogany display board  
bleeding with posters of life.

I turn, my gaze falls on  
the grey beard of a gentleman  
stooped on a stone turtle outside the main building.

Bald, bespectacled and tall,  
he has an uncanny resemblance to my father.

Hands in his pants pockets,  
his tanned head bobs around,  
crescent smiles spill and tumble.

We spark a little chit-chat  
about a past in India  
as though over sips of coffee and dips of tea

in my mother tongue Tamil.  
*I went to Stella Maris College.*

He asks me  
what my husband does, how old my daughter is,  
and what I do.

*I am a poet*

the lilies, pansies and  
drooping daisies

unfurl that moment  
and the bouncing bees flap their wings.

With the demeanor of a toddler,  
he ruffles through his bag,  
hands me a brochure and pen; smiles,

asks to write down my name  
and the title of my book.  
He tells me his name

*Mr. Balasubramanian—*

A gentleman I met today;  
Yesterday, he must have been like me,  
tall and busy

and I will be like him one day:  
Looking for a poet to pass by,  
a partner to talk to.

## The Cherry Swing

Summer of '86—  
Horns blaring, bells ringing;  
above the rising steam  
of the Grand Trunk Express

an unseen seamstress  
weaves  
on the skies of Madras—

*We have arrived.*

After a forty-eight-hour journey  
through rocks and rivulets  
of the Deccan plateau and the Yamuna Valley,

we rise from passenger seats,  
tomato paste-smearred spoons  
tinkling our steel lunch boxes.

Out of the taxi,  
into open arms  
of the painted iron gates  
we stand in front of my  
grandparents' big brick house.

My sister and I race  
towards Grandpa,  
his grey locks, amber eyes,  
ear-to-ear smile

welcoming us.

By the front porch,  
a mogra tree sways,  
its petals strewing on the cherry swing.

I hop on its wooden seat,  
slowly wiggle my feet,  
lean back, toes pointing skyward,  
touching wonder.

Everything happens around that swing.

*Paati* pops piping hot potato fritters  
into our mouths

in a nine-yard *pochampalli* sari,  
her 3-ft long hair pulled into a slick bun.  
She strings her *tanpura*,  
hums glorious hymns.

With hands on her hips, she scolds  
the rowdy street children, their hearts pure,  
splashing cow manure.

*Thatha* draws figures on an inviting slate,  
blue and pink chalks screeching,  
our heads nodding

to the tales of geometry.

We tease buffalos, pull their bushed tails,  
strike marbles on the tar road  
with the milkman's kids,

sniffing harmony.

Sunday afternoons,  
licking popsicles in the hot sun,  
we come back from the beach,  
dust our sandy pelican feet,  
thrust the swing again.

Our smocked dresses  
and curly tresses flow  
in the infinity of air,  
feet kicking,  
crescent smiles tickling

as we jump off the cherry swing,  
rush and run  
into the arms of *Thatha* and *Paati*.

## The Magnolia Beckons

Down the pebbled driveway,  
Grandma Jade limps with her walking stick,  
her bald head wrapped in a faded batik bandana.

She picks pine cones, plucks marigolds,  
gives water to the kitten,  
then dawdles away into her living room.

Dwindled by dementia,  
she answers the doorbell to the mailman,  
opens her mouth to say *thank you*  
but bubbles of saliva emerge instead.

When I feed her roast beef and potatoes,  
the gravy dribbles down her chin.  
She swats away the fork,  
slaps my dangling earring.

Halfway down the white piano keys,  
her fingers shiver, voice shrills.  
She tilts her head,  
points at the ceiling to the lonely bulb,  
then looks down the grooves of the cherry floor  
as I sing my song *The Magnolia Beckons*.

*She is the magnolia—  
In eighty-seven years of worthy bloom  
she stands tall and still,  
births bright white blossoms,  
sings under the merry skies,  
her glistening locks performing a soliloquy.*

*Under the reverie of velvet clouds,  
sun rays bounce off the dark green spectacle.  
A lemony fragrance raptures,  
captures her beauty  
as she nods.*

Now, a shriveled shrub  
in want of wisps of thought  
to lift a withered mind,

she twitches  
as the breeze touches her freckled skin.

Sorrow rolls down my cheeks, grips me.  
Grandma Jade grasps my hand, settles into a floating glance,  
opens her mouth in an *O*,

*Oh Dear Kunjali,  
may the Sun, the shade and the blooming viola  
shower their bounty on you.*

She drops my hand, sinks  
on the sofa bed,  
closes her eyes.

A fading green lament,  
she sheds bits of life;  
her falling leaves  
whisk and settle  
on beds of calm earth.

## The Yellow Poncho

Swaddled  
in rustling plastic ponchos,  
smiles and miles of enthusiasm,

we tiptoe the dark tunnels  
through the nexus of Niagara.

My husband, daughter and I  
dazzle in yellow,  
dance to a bellow of the mist.

The rush, the gush, the splash

sprays our hair,  
trickles down our cheeks,  
lifts us.

I trace the grin on her face,  
flirt with the twinkle in his hazel eyes,

Oh, the jiggle I feel when  
I watch the cool mystery melt in front of me.

In the hands of a stranger,  
the camera clicks

my heart ticks as  
we pose in our ponchos,

water opposes  
our beating bodies,  
the trembling flesh.

Such are the shakes and shivers  
of a chilly descent

sprinkling glee  
on *a journey*

*behind the falls.*

Destined to bathe  
in this reverie of a drizzle,

after a quarter of an hour  
wading through the wet,  
our shoes soiled,

soles  
in search of the divine

we shake our damp hair,  
unbutton the ponchos,  
crumple and slide them  
through the trash can,

walk away swinging hand-in-hand.



## The Mountain View

Sitting by the window  
of a Carolina mountain home,  
I see an orb of optimistic orange dipping  
into the cusp of a mossy mountain.

Peppermint pink burns crimson as the sky  
blankets the road, the boulder,  
the withering oak.

The naked branches of the beech tree  
flutter their fingers in the wind,  
mingling, sighing, whispering  
to the bluebirds,

two lovers undulating through a journey,  
beautiful beings  
kissing  
and coalescing in harmony.

The breeze is now subtle,  
the branches, slow.

I don't know when another stroke  
of the winsome wind will cloak this calm.

I take a deep breath, the sun is ready  
to set, ready to rise tomorrow.