

Poem 1: This Corridor Will Make You Hungry

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Sinhala: the native language of Sri Lanka

Ammi: the Sinhala word for 'mom'

Thaththi: the Sinhala word for 'dad'

Wambatu: the Sinhala word for 'eggplant'

## This Corridor Will Make You Hungry

This corridor has many doorways, and its doorways have nameplates that will make you hungry  
On one, it says 'Kiribath, But They Forgot To Serve It With Lunumiris'  
You feel apprehensive, because Sri Lankans *do not* eat kiribath without lunumiris...  
How else would the delicate coconut milk flavor nestled within the young rice grains be coaxed out, if not with spice and fishiness and onion?

When you push open the door you see a scene from New Years' Day 2002  
Your 10-year-old self is toying with the kiribath on the plate in front of you,  
and your family is around the kitchen table at your parents' old house  
Ammi, Thatthi, and your sister have finished eating and will soon get up to put their plates away  
"Keep eating!" you urge your younger self, because you want them to stay at the table  
That way, you can freeze this moment where everyone is happy  
A proper kiribath requires patience; Ammi has taught you to watch carefully to ensure that the rice grains absorb the coconut milk completely  
You are an expert in absorption, and so you take in the scene in front of you,  
listening hungrily to the conversation  
You are feeding off of its noise and laughter,  
and are satiated, though your stomach is empty  
Though mom forgot the lunumiris—the height of betrayal—  
Everyone is peaceful, and no one is yelling.

Another door, another nameplate; this one says 'String Hoppers and Egg Curry—Too Much Salt'  
In the scene inside, you are crying at the same table, now 18 years old  
Your salty tears are mixing in with the bright yellow, turmeric-rich egg curry on your plate  
You have barely touched your string hoppers  
because you have finally decided that *yes*, you *are* going away for college,  
to the strange and faraway land of  
"Berkeleyyyyyy, Califorrrrrn-iiii-aaaaaa!"  
Your brother is only 7, so he doesn't realize that you will be gone for four years  
but the aching inside of you has already started  
when you realize he will have memories of fuzzy Skype calls and missed holidays  
while you will have memories of 'finding yourself'

The last door you open has a nameplate that says "Beginner's-Level Wambatu Curry—A Vessel"  
You were five when you decided that Ammi's Wambatu curry was your favorite food in the world

The scene inside is of your Chicago apartment, and an empty bowl and silverware are laid out neatly on your coffee table  
On the stove are the results of your first attempt at Wambatu curry, and you serve yourself a large portion

The dark purple skin glistens with oil, and you smell the layered spices: mustard seeds, coriander, chili powder

Truly, it is mediocre, but your tongue is roving over the sinuous surfaces, zealous in its taste pilgrimage

And isn't it funny, then, when you can so vividly taste the separate memories that are tied up in a meal?

Dishes as vessels that can transport you faster, more suddenly than words ever could

To leave you gasping, crying, laughing, walking corridors for connection?

## When He Stares At The Hair On Your Arms

On the Red Line to work, my carefully painted face of makeup  
provides me no shield when I see that the white man next to me is staring intently at the hair on my  
arms

It is not in admiration for the warmth it gives me or the darkness of each black follicle  
He is disgusted by its expanse, and how it rests against my brown skin

Each hair has done him *great personal harm*, and is part of a thick cord that's been woven  
To separate me from his idea of womanly beauty  
'Beauty'—at least in his eyes—is a skulking figure that shape-shifts and grows,  
but its color remains starkly white  
And demands the hair at the very, very least be the lightest whisper of gold-spun silk  
Barely there so as not to offend

The pains I have taken in order to appease [my lipstick, the feminine pleats of my dress]  
are invisible  
Because he can only see my hair and its darkness  
Perhaps he's scared of its blackness?

In Chicago, *B-l-a-c-k-n-e-s-s* is a thing they tell you is ugly  
Maybe not explicitly, but then why else is there such blatant disrespect of black bodies?  
Why else does our city government fail to invest in its blackest neighborhoods?  
If the hair on my arms were a different color, would he respect me then?

At work, I try to use numbers to make sense of all that is backwards in this city  
In its policies, in its leaders and their failings  
But numbers don't provide me with the words I need now on the Red Line  
to confront the man that has been staring unencumbered for minutes on end  
at the hair on my arms  
How can numbers change the specters that have shaped his norms?  
Numbers do not stand a chance against his narrative of what it means for a woman to have worth

For as many numbers I crunch, I may never find a way to make him feel what I feel—the warmth of the  
hair on my arms, and its brush against everyone I pass

**Self Love: The Gameshow**

I should have ordered a cake and hung streamers on the day I discovered  
That self-love is a gameshow, and—no—  
The audience will not always be sympathetic  
To its contestants

Behind door number 1:  
My Facebook post from May 20, 2018  
A rare selfie, taken just after my purple hair debut  
And maybe it's because, for once, I've straightened my stubborn curly hair  
Or because you don't generally see purple hair  
Unless it's on a white girl  
But that photo gets 124 likes

Behind door number 2:  
My post from July 9, 2018  
A quote that I love, about speaking up against oppression  
And the healing it cultivates for people of color  
And maybe it's because I accidentally forgot a comma  
Or my explicit use of the word 'racism'  
But that post only gets 13 likes

My rigorous analysis tells me I should pick door number 1  
Over and over and over again  
Because my straight purple hair and white gleaming teeth  
Would be more palatable for the studio audience  
As they roam their Facebook feeds  
of dogs, wedding shoots, and Amalfi coast vacations

I am torn between the two.  
As I speculate, the audience becomes indignant:  
"Not door number 2, dummy! That's not self-love...it's preaching!"  
And their shouting is drowning out my voice  
As I try to explain that in this country,  
When you look like me, picking door number 2  
is indeed self-love  
And though there may be no cash prize,  
And the big reveal may engender scorn  
*It is self-love, and it is radical*

## **Crystal Ball Logic Game**

*Answer all of the following to the best of your ability. Even if you are uncertain of your answer, do not leave questions blank.*

1) If Andrew has 20/20 vision and is holding one crystal ball,  
And Amanda has 20/40 vision and is holding two crystal balls,  
What is the likelihood that either of them will see a clear future for me—a gay woman of color, who is single and dating in America?

2a) Between OkCupid, Tinder, and HER, what are the odds that someone will ask  
“Are you *really* a lesbian?” when they see my profile picture?  
(Hint: in it, I am wearing lipstick and a dress)

2b) If I have not eaten in 6 hours and choose to check my chat messages while hangry, how many  
\*unique\* responses to that [irritating] question can I come up with?

3) If my voice sounds hollow over the phone, which of the following is likely the heaviest contributor?

A) My unrelenting “impostor syndrome”, lodged comfortably in the question of my worth in the workplace

B) Contending with the disappointment of my immigrant parents, who see my rejection of their values as disrespect

Or

C) My 2am TV habit (cycling between *Twin Peaks* and *Broadchurch*)