

411004 — 43606

yashada wagle

i am five and restless
my gaze fixed at the entrance gate
to the building that my grandmother's apartment floats in
i pace my little legs up and down the balcony
scraping my knee on the corner of the wooden swing
every time, waiting
for a friend to come beckon me
so we can put to use the hopscotch grid we drew
on the street right outside
yesterday.

every afternoon of being five looks like this.

the scintillating pattern that the huge banyan down the corner
paints on prabhat road, lane 14—
with generous swashes of the summer sun—
watches over the lines of chalk
that make this street a playground, come summer

as pune revels in its afternoon siestas
every day, little legs aged five to ten
claim this street their kingdom.
it becomes an unwritten rule for anyone on wheels
to pause, watch out
for bold chalk lines and little hands drawing them
and to proceed with caution.

i am twenty five and alone
staring out the window of my
humble homestay
in toledo, ohio

i find myself pacing in restlessness
as my mind tries to navigate the grid
of the old orchard neighborhood
to find the most discreet yet safest
path to the grocery store

every other day here has felt like this.

the scintillating pattern that the huge trees
lining the edges of every street here paint—
with generous swashes of the summer sun—
the discomfort of my brown skin
that has been seen by an otherifying gaze, this summer

as the quiescence of this dainty precinct
drifts into its pristine sunsets
and dusk sets in
it becomes an unwritten rule for anyone *else*
to pause, watch out
for unsettling stares and the bold eyes behind them
and to proceed with caution.

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a week after someone has talked down to me
in the checkout aisle at the grocery store—
and i have tried my best to suppress tears on the walk back—
mum calls from home.

she asks me about old orchard
i ask her about prabhat road

for a moment, the silence on the line hangs in the space between us, confused.

she tells me the old banyan was hacked down last week.
“they have been widening the street,
turning it from tar to concrete”
she says.

there will be no chalk lines, now.
no little bodies making a realm out of a road every afternoon.

disturbed, i tell her about my current habitat.
“there is no discomfort here”— i lie—
“just pleasing green canopies like the prabhat road
of twenty years ago”