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Morning Chai

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Megha Jain. *Shree*.
Oil on Canvas



Morning Chai
Khalid Mukhtar

My earliest memory of it goes back to my boyhood days:
a porcelain cup of the steaming liquid
sitting on a saucer with two Marie tea biscuits
carried into my grandfather's presence.
He lowered his paper momentarily
to survey the beverage and gauge
its temperature with the thermometer
in his eye.

Or my uncle - my favorite uncle - who
stopped by every morning.
He always had a glint in his eye.
He sat on the large swing
under the bougainvillea vines, the sun
mottling his plaid eighties button-down with its golden drops.
He didn't care for cookies
just a hot cup capable of raising enough fog

to temper the tirade of his sister - my mother - aimed at all things
mundane
that tested the patience of a mother of three
keeping house for a sailor
away at sea.

He held the paper folded over this way and that so that
Only the column he read was visible.
It took all of his left hand.
In his right was the cup with – is there a word for the loopy little
handle on it – jammed between the flesh of his pointer
and the knuckle of his middle finger
while an interrupted cigarette dangled
from the space between another pair of digits, its ash
grown a full inch, as gray and brittle
as life itself.

I recall the day laborer who showed up to repair a broken curb
sitting on his haunches upon the rubble he was due to replace
with saplings,
his multi-patterned lungi pulled around his legs in a show
of modesty.
Like my uncle, he slurped the hot liquid from his cup, the morning air
thick with melting dew
and singing birds
and the nonstop blare of traffic
that overcame the long driveway
all adding to the flirtatious side glances he shot
at the young servant girl
wolfing down her breakfast
off to the side
around the back of the house.
She had her cup too.
She gulped down the hotness
rapidly.

Chai.
From the same pot of water.
The same tea leaves
The same milk.
Sipped.
Slurped.

Off to work.