Bangalore, anglicized from Bengaluru, thought to be a city of boiled beans, named for the hospitality of an old woman by the grace of a lost and hungry king. Or for Benga-valuru, city of guards turned city of gardens turned city of garbage, as the new joke goes. Diagnosed with the second-worst traffic in the world: a place that forces you to take your time. Maybe this is why its inhabitants hark for older, slower days, but only ever in English, only those that live in its stone-paved heart. The best view of the city is from below; lay your head on the lap of a fellow passenger and stare at the trees stretching their arms across the street while you can, before they finally finish constructing the flyover. Let the snail-pace of the car draw your gaze skywards, ask for the names of the flowers that fall in June: meet gulmohar, tabebuia, jacaranda. In a few weeks’ time, you will be able to place yourself precisely from what you see outside the window, where branches cross with telephone wires that dip and crest with each pole, the closest thing to waves in a landlocked, riverless city. Without this current to follow, it’s no wonder the king got lost.
The Gentle Joke of Speaking with my Grandmother

I.
Achamma’s speech is unbound by time —
she draws past tense into the present,
habits of history become actions
yet to happen in English.
Maybe this is why I haven’t yet cried:
she points with her chin
to the empty chair beside her,
hands preoccupied with rice,
and says something about how Achachan “loves”
this particular dish: spicy baingan or rich kofta
or sugar in his curd.
I almost believe he will emerge
from the bedroom, late for lunch again,
stroll around the table and take his seat,
sunlight haloing his silver hair.

II.
Now he is gone, and Achamma’s tongue is lovingly overcome
with Malayalam at the breakfast table. My father responds in English,
gifting me puzzle pieces to fit into the jigsaw conversation.

My confusion is infantile; I try to distinguish the single stream of sound,
words blending to blur, bending around dry interjections of English.
She switches for my benefit, sudden as a river pitching into waterfall,
rushing just as easily into the tail-end of a story whose overture
flew over my bhasha-parched head. My mouth falls open, at a loss
in sudden familiarity, swimming upstream for clarity.

She ends her tale with a smile, leaving me to flounder,
fish-lipped, at the holes in my knowledge. I confess
_Achamma, I don’t know what you’re talking about._

She misunderstands — _no, no how can you know? You weren’t born
at that time_ — giggles at my foolishness, and I join, awed
by the unexpected joy of our disconnect; laughing
at our beautiful mutual mistake.
Spice Trade

Teabags erase the earth, the warmth
their ginger labels promise;
trapped cinnamon is sharper than my tongue
can take, and the ghost of elaichi
appeals to me, pungent shock-pods
boiled to subtlety.
That’s the bargain of the spice-tamer:
every flavor is traded for tolerance, lost
across borders, or to the salt of the sea.

Away from home, the only clove I taste
comes from toothpaste
and the word ‘spice’ means
simply, strength.
I cannot blame ancestry —
my cousins too are prone
to crafting weak blends, paler
than the chai tailored to my tastebuds
brewed to milky amber,
strained into ring-stained china.

Always, the first sip burns —
I never learn —
but numbness is a small price to pay
for liquid gold, warm bones
on a rain-embroidered day.
Veranda Sestina

Some days we decide to eat our breakfast in the garden
load trays with steaming upma, fresh vadas, a spread
of chutneys, and steel spoons. My sister and I race our dogs
down the stairs, set our banquet on the wooden bench,
lay the tablecloth embroidered lush with flowers,
tug its edges smooth, and turn on the fountain.

Upended trees dissolve in green water — the fountain
ripples and blurs, summoning my grandmother to the garden.
She takes a break from her cooking to smell the flowers
on the jasmine creeper, white as the batter she retreats to spread
on the tawa, promising us dosai soon. I shift breakfast from the bench
to the table; its moving scent heralds the begging faces of my dogs,

ears perked, eyes wide, heads cocked to a side. “These dogs,”
says my descending mother, “have high expectations.” A small fountain
of sambhar is displaced from its bowl by a serving spoon, and the bench
creaks as I take my seat at its center, turning my back to the garden
where the youngest of my pets begins to sun-bathe, spreads
herself in Sunday light, rolling over grass and flowers.

My grandmother emerges with the dosai - crisp, white as flour -
and takes her seat next to mine just in time for the dogs,
running on the lawn, to make a beeline for the pond. I spread
my arms to shelter our food from the splash of their fountain -
they wade, oblivious to our objections, and make for the garden
to shake themselves off in the sun, showering the bench
with a second dose of morning dew. The jasmine scent from the bench mixes with the perfume of our meal. My mother praises other flowers - red hibiscus, water lily, and purple impatiens adorn the overgrown garden, foliage weighing our fence down. Being done with the sun, the dogs settle beneath our seats, the pool of their drool rivaling the fountain, mimicking the way our lips smack as we relish the spread.

The kind of satisfaction only a good meal can yield spreads smiles, stills us in our seats, heavy selves glued to the bench. We laze in the daze of the weekend, drowsy on the fountain’s rush, allowing stains to dry out on the doomed flowers of the tablecloth. Soon enough, giggling at our relentless dogs we carry away empty trays and leave behind an empty garden.

Each ripple from the fountain finds the pond-edge, spreads itself too far, spills into the garden, where the bench lies weightless under flowers forsaken by the dogs.