

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

---

Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 18

---

June 2008

## Playing Princess

Sindjua Sathiyaseelan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate>

---

### Recommended Citation

Sathiyaseelan, Sindjua (2008) "Playing Princess," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 18.  
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol8/iss1/18>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact [ORB@binghamton.edu](mailto:ORB@binghamton.edu).

# Sathiyaseelan: Playing Princess

## PLAYING PRINCESS

Sinduja Sathiyaseelan

Red like my mother's sari, that she wore on her wedding day and never again, pure and hopeful, the sari with delicate gold peacocks dancing on silk, strutting their embroidered feathers to the sky.

Red like my father's mouth after chewing betel leaves.

Red like blood, when we found Peter Uncle strewn across the branches of the guava tree, his arms in five pieces, a hole in his stomach, his bones gleaming in the morning sun.

Red like the sand, the mud from which my sister Parvati and I made play food that dried in the sun, miniature *vadaas* and *samosas* and *murukus*, unaware like my mother that we were shaping our futures in the clay.

Red like Fridays, when everyone dressed up and went to temple.

Red like the coat of the goat we raised, whose milk I grew up on, the goat that got too old to give milk, the goat that we slaughtered for New Year's Day feast.

Red like the hibiscus flowers that grew in our yard and that we plucked to offer the gods when we went to temple, the flowers that wilted after the goat died.

Red like my coral birth stone Appa placed in a ring for my birthday to keep me safe, the ring I lost at school one day.

Red like the mehendi that darkened my mother's hands on her wedding, unaware that in five years she would birth two daughters, the first one ugly like mud and the last one too fair, unaware that in seven years she would be dead of a tumor the doctors said was benign.

Padma chased me up a tree once. I don't know how she did it, being only four years old and as tall as my waist. But she had nails and jaws like sharks. She even barked at me.

We played under the guava tree in her backyard. Padma's

Bata slippers protected her from the red sand that perpetually coated my feet. She never sat down in the sand or grass because of the red ants. She was a princess, the daughter of doctors. She had her hunched grandmother bring her a small folding chair to sit on while we played.

I *had* to play with her. Her aunt was my tutoring teacher, or I would have never done it. Ever. Sometimes I would get lucky and ride away on my bike before I was asked to play.

I hated her, hated how she wouldn't step outside without her slippers, hated how pressed and crisp her sundresses were, hated how her short hair was always in two pig-tailed fountains. Even her own cousin hated her.

Most days we played princess and prince.

"You be the prince," Padma told me, handing me the raggedy penguin doll we used for the prince. It had an old brooch pinned in the middle of its bowtie.

"The princess needs to dress for the party," she went on, settling into her chair with the princess doll as her cousin and I sat before her. "You." She pointed at me. "You can't be here. You have to be at your castle."

"Where's the castle?"

She pointed to the veranda, far away from the guava tree. I would have to entertain myself until the party. There was an ant castle there, proud and majestic and crawling with red ants. They built castles high. I loved dripping water onto the towers and watching them collapse, jumping from foot to foot to make sure the ants didn't touch me.

One of the ants tried to crawl onto my foot. I flung it off, and it ran in circles before finding a line to join. Another ant struggled to keep up with the others, its little legs scurrying fast but no match for the weight of the dead ant stuck to its back. The ant dragged its dead brother slowly up the wall of a tower and into the pit.

We all have dark skin in my family, but not so dark like the beggars or the jungle people. Not like we rubbed coal on our faces. Not like mud.

My father is a kind man, if poor. Rather short and chubby, with a large moustache and crooked teeth. When we were little he would buy us candy from the wine shop when he came home with staleness on his breath.

My mother never liked him at night. She would always cluck her tongue and glare at him. She never said anything. Her eyes were too big for her face and her lips were swollen as if they had been stung by bees. In her wedding picture that hangs in our hall she has so much white powder on her face you can't even recognize her.

Parvati was four years younger than me, fair and beautiful and loud-mouthed. She was the moon to my darkness. All the relatives loved her and compared her to the actresses on TV, and I always thought that she would grow up to wear kohl on her eyes and dart around trees while violins serenaded in the background. Grow up to have a lover, grow up to pick her husband. Who knew that she would never grow up at all. Who knew that she would be trapped in the mud.

There were bullet holes in the walls of our house, the cement crumbling into powder and settling in the deep recesses. When no one was around I often stuck my finger in those holes and licked off the cement. It tasted better than sugar.

One day I got the courage to talk back to Padma, to suggest that maybe she should let her younger cousin be the princess once, the cousin with large eyes that watered whenever Padma bossed her around, the cousin who wouldn't stand up for herself. "Why don't you ever let her be the princess, Padma?"

"Don't you talk to me like that, darkie," Padma said.

I clenched my hands.

She got up from where she was sitting, the only shady place under the guava tree. Sashaying to me, she imitated the walk of an actress, bouncing on the heels of her feet, swaying her hips, head tilted.

Padma grabbed my hand and spread her fingers next to it. Her skin was milky gold. Mine was dusty and dark like coffee.

"Like I said, don't ever talk to me like that." She smiled a sticky too-sweet leer, her straight, even teeth bare but her eyes frozen. "Darkie."

She turned and walked back to her chair underneath the guava tree, swaying her hips.

I had a cat once that drowned in the well behind our house. Probably a trick played by the rascally boys, my mother told me. *I hate the rascally boys, Amma*. Don't. They're just trapped, like all of us.

The tensions bubbling between Singhalese and Tamil, Buddhists and Hindus—the tensions didn't affect me. The rascally boys, maybe. But not me.

Some of them had probably lost family to one side or another, maybe in a bombing or two. Sometimes the tension reached a rolling boil and leaped out of the pan. Like the cat that leaped off the cement wall of the well.

I cried all night, the ghost of the cat meowing around my ankles and sometimes coming by my head to fluff up my pillow. I woke up with a puffed face, and that day at school when I was sitting on the steps that led to the sandy playground—still crying—an older boy asked, "How is your cat, Anjali? I heard it killed itself. Did it scream?"

He was a rascally boy with teeth too big and hair too short and burn marks on his legs from a heated spoon. A boy who looked too odd in his white uniform to not be rascally.

I didn't plan it or think about it, but I was soon being hit by Miss Virginia's switch for throwing sand in the boy's face. When my father picked me up and was told, his face grew dark

and he didn't talk on the walk home. He explained in a hushed voice to Amma, who raged and yelled until Appa gave her a warning look.

After Appa had left to meet his friends at the wine shop, my mother held me down and pressed a heated spoon to my leg. I tried not to struggle, but my arms flailed and my legs kicked as if they had minds that didn't care if they insulted Amma, didn't care about the order of the family.

Amma then cried and soothed the burn with honey and gave me sweetened goat's milk to drink.

She tried to put me to bed but Parvati, who was only one, started crying. I think Amma knew she would get hit when Appa came back. Appa usually sang and danced for us and balanced bottles on his head, laughing with his crooked teeth and jumping with his belly. But when he'd come home to find us being hit, he'd yell at Amma and slap her. She was afraid. I could tell.

I lay down hearing the sounds of them arguing, Amma that she had wanted to work at a bank and Appa that they would have just taken advantage of her. Amma's voice was deep and grated, an anger I hadn't heard before.

I looked at my leg under the moonlight. It seemed so foreign a concept that now I had a brand on my leg, too.

The water smelled of salt, the odor ballooning off the surface and making my stomach turn. We were on our way to Peter Uncle's wedding in Trinco, across the lagoon. The small wooden rowboat looked like it could fit four people, but there were eight of us on it, crammed together like tin fish, the salt of sweat mixing with the salt of the sea and rocking my gut. The sea was calm, but the boat lulled and danced like bile.

"Off the edge, child," the driver said to me.

His skin was the color of coconuts. His sarong and beniyan were both a murky, muddy gray and hung limp on his bones. He pulled me roughly by the hand to the front of the boat so that I could vomit off the side into the water. The sea was dark

under the black sky, more like ink than water. My vomit floated like froth, being carried away to the shore we couldn't see.

The rest of the way I had to crouch with my head between my knees. My neck ached and my feet were wet, but I was too scared to complain. The driver looked like a Tiger.

Appa sometimes cries at night. He doesn't make a sound, but I can see his body hiccupping when I sneak to the bathroom.

Padma's parents were doctors on assignment in Trinco. She lived with her grandmother and aunt in a bungalow, a little house that was all nose and no nose hair.

Her parents visited her three times a year, once on each of their birthdays. Her father scared me. He was tall and handsome and wore large glasses like the people in the movies. His shirt was always ironed and white, and he never wore sarongs like Appa did. Her mother was wilting, her hair falling out in places, her skin paler than her daughter's. Padma's cousin always whispered that she was dying.

Padma was playing the princess again that day, and I was the prince. I waited on the veranda, squishing the prince penguin's nose into its face. Her father was also out there, sitting on the steps to the door, leaning on one of the two large columns that flanked the old house. His face was hidden by a newspaper, and I was glad. He always looked at me funny, like I wasn't built right, like I was too dark and too tall and too angular, like my bones were too big for my body, like I would never be beautiful.

The day when Padma chased me up the tree, he was there, and all he did was laugh. He gave Padma amused looks, and, after I started crying, he told her to let me go, but he was still laughing. Padma was always meaner when he was around.

"The princess is ready," Padma said.

I dragged the penguin back to the guava tree that now hung heavy with fruit. The princess, dressed in gold brocade and a

curry leaf garland, made her entrance into the throne room of the palace. There were many princes in attendance, but the only one that mattered was the penguin prince. The princess swayed her hips as she made her way to him, placing the garland from her own neck around his. He touched her face, and she turned away coyly, dropping to her knees to touch her new husband's feet.

Padma's grandmother brought out juice in little flowered glasses on a tray. Padma ran to get the first pick, after which we both took our turns. She took a sip and spit it all out onto the grandmother's feet. Padma's cousin and I jumped back to avoid the splatter. We watched in horror as Padma raised her little hand and slapped one, two, three, four times on the grandmother's face as she squatted with the tray.

In five long strides, before we knew what was going on, Padma's father had crossed the length to the tree, taken a curry leaf branch, and raised it.

The first blow seemed to take forever. I followed the branch with my eyes as it curved back like a snake in her father's hand, the wind stripping it of some leaves. Padma's scream exploded in my head, and everyone scrambled out of the way.

Padma hopped from leg to leg as the branch marred her white legs with slim pink welts. The tears didn't stop.

My face burned, and my stomach churned the juice uncomfortably. I tried to turn my eyes, but Padma ran and screamed into my field of vision. I looked at the tree. The guavas were almost ripe, pulling down the branches.

I stood rooted. My legs wouldn't move even if I had wanted to run. I wanted to be back home, playing hopscotch with Parvati and the mango core we had dried out the day before. I wondered if Padma's legs would bleed. Part of me, the part that wanted to bite her back, wanted to see it. The part that hated blood didn't.

For two weeks after, Padma's aunt didn't stop me after lessons to play. Padma hid when I came for tuition, and, when I finally saw her, the welts had faded to a similarity with the brand Amma's heated spoon had given me.