



On receiving director Erin Toale's invitation to write for Bird Show, I was drawn to her and Tulika Ladsariya's shared views on learning and mutual generosity plus their attunement to the cyclical rhythms in nature. In a world that has become increasingly cynical, it is easy to see fault around us. I could've written on present day crises being interlinked with generations of extractivism, about intergenerational trauma and the perils of individualist capitalism (that plague the art world...) but it feels rote to complain. Instead, in an endeavor to align with Erin and Tulika's mindset, I decided to structure the essay in parallel with the artist's process- primarily in sync with the act of propagation. To move from a mindset of scarcity to that of abundance, I decided to wrangle with roots that have been concealed from plain view, providing a snapshot of entanglement as an Indian woman transplanted in America.

STEP 1: CUT STEM JUST BELOW THE NODE

Moving to America in 1988, I landed in L.A. with my parents and a stuffed puppy in tow. I recall barely breathing when asked my name, a mere lowly whispered 'pia' slipped out of apologetic, thin lips. 'Pia' was (and continues to be) misconstrued for anything but... "Lia?", "Mia?", "Tia?", they spit back, most commonly yodeling "Beee-yaa?"- serving as a constant reminder of my unbelonging. As a shy but friendly 6 year old with little concern for identity politics, I wondered how three alphabets sung with the simplest intonation could be botched so easily. I was quiet around elders as they took to larger schemes: 'adult-world' concerns like visas, housing, work permits, and transportation, to name a few. I grew comfortable vying for attention between "more important matters" and seldom doubted their intentions. The fear of being written off as a 'bad daughter' kept me from asking too many questions.

My mother seamlessly took on the role of caretaker to me and my American-born cousins upon arriving at my aunts house in Los Angeles. Preparing breakfasts to cure my homesickness, I would be offered an egg and toast each morning. Once an older cousin sat across from me, devouring a half eaten birthday cake. "I'm allowed to eat cake for breakfast", she barked, twirling a plastic spoon between her index finger and thumb defiantly. Thinking back, this was possibly my first encounter with a brazen brand of American freedom that was unfamiliar to me. Sharing food at a dining table was a prerequisite to *being-in* family, sharing details of each day- a highway to lifelong enmeshment. There was no cake for me, especially not at breakfast, and my parents ensured I valued each hand-me-down we were given along the way. Assigning 'proper'

meanings to the hierarchy of objects we collected as we moved between cities, we began to build a life as immigrants. Moving cardboard boxes became furniture: a brightly colored bedsheet tent became a safe space, a "Sesame Street" toy table with Big Bird's body as a back and outstretched wings as arms became my first desk chair, and a second-hand light blue pickup truck with extra large wheels was our first "car". Each possession registered our belonging just a little bit more.

Two of my four grandparents migrated from border towns in Jammu and Lahore during the partition of 1947. I often question how generations of movement and migration left three consequent generations with a penchant for objects of nostalgia. Coming with little and leaving with a lot, the weight of physical and emotional baggage fills spaces that otherwise feel emptied of meaning. As an individual circumstantially severed from her homeland, I have whittled these down to a collection of 'holdable' sculptures. By miniaturizing my collection, I am now able to move cities without the weight of a relocation budget.

Between 1989 and 1991, we spent time between Houston and New Orleans. I came to understand the value of a house, a private backyard, a 'pooper scooper' (a lesson in civil hygiene) and the ability to wear "what I like" to school. My parents' closest friends had a teenage daughter whom I idolized, and an aging Alsatian I adored. My mother was favored by her Indian-American friends for her *rotis* and *parathas* (said with inflections where 'T's become rounded, rolling 'DD's, ie; "*Sarita, we love your roddi's and paradda's*"), and my father was a working man struggling with an illness, later diagnosed as bipolar disorder.

I will refrain from speaking about my experience of living with bipolar in a immigrant household, but I will mention the attitude with which it was received and how it quickly went on to inform my own survival strategies. Imaginary codes of conduct were imposed on our family of three, and by this time I'd tricked myself into believing that everything really *could be better for us* abroad. The aspiration to embark on our *own* journey, away from the judgment and constructs of a patriarchal family, had us in a precarious situation where we had to single handedly manage crisis in a landscape where our character was premeditated on material belonging, and other indicators of financial mobility. My mothers cooking and giving nature gave her the ability to situate herself without showing her pain, while I maintained character as a sweet, smiling and friendly 6, 7, 8 year old with just enough second-hand paraphernalia to be deemed 'cool' by other Indian-American kids. Behind closed doors, the silent agreement of supporting one another while brushing the truth under heavily carpeted apartment floors became *de rigueur*. Writing to my family back in India, I'd disguise our hardships in big, bright, goofy calligraphy. "I miss you" and "Love you XO " became recognizable signs of an overcompensating adolescent. Going to elementary school, I'd shed as many signifiers as I could of my Indianness, eventually taking on a bit of a nasal twang in my accent. I noticed how I was looked at and made myself as invisible as possible. The playground was a social battlefield, a place where I went to play but mostly stayed to listen and watch.

STEP 2: PLACE CUTTING IN STERILIZED GLASS PLANTER WITH CLEAN WATER

Unable to fully care for an ailing parent, we returned to India in 1991 for my father to undergo 'treatments' his family found fitting. My mother and I were separated from him for over a year as his family searched for 'remedies' unfit for the living. We returned to Bombay later to resume a somewhat sedated, 'normal' life together.

20 years later, lassoed to the aspirations of my husband, I returned to America to be reminded of the constant state of 'not-enoughness' that plagues the transplanted body. In India, the constant criticism of not living up to one's *fullest potential* marked several of my middle school report cards. In America, it is the miserable feeling of not understanding your American counterparts' chronic concern for themselves that makes you move through life switching feet as you turn to a beat, keeping one big toe planted on the ground at all times. This endless pirouette of decreasing emotional footprint and extending space for those around you had me growing untethered. Free-wheeling through a cycle of *me vs. you* needs- I was afraid this choreography between partners, friends, and peers would go awry. The only way I see it now is that the advantage of growing untethered is also an act of un-meshment from societal structures that keep the transplant bound to obsolete customary behavior. The not-so-good part about growing untethered is that you can begin to feel lost enough- often enough- for it to begin to feel like habit.



Having cut my teeth in Indian Contemporary Art, I was hoping to continue my career in America. I faced my first professional impediment in an interview I had for an internship at a large

museum. After being offered the position, I was told I'd need a Masters Degree to "professionalize" my practice. In a panic, I moved through a prestigious Masters program afforded by the entirety of our life savings, coming out the other end in a Trumpian economy. In a precarious field (which pays salaries well under the prerequisite salary to afford a work visa) and a risk averse immigration environment, I mutated practices to survive. I've turned into what I call a renegade curator- working outside the institution, scratching at the peripheries, and permeating the DIY scene that Chicago knows and loves all too well.

Today, my ability to live within these boundaries affords me the ability to write in first-person. This forces the question of how it does not come naturally to me, nor women before me, and how the ability to 'write through the body', as Trinh T. Minh-Ha describes, is tied to a privilege that is not even recognized in the West. The conscious exercise of giving language to the unspoken and erased shapes of linguistic flesh, asserting my being through the experiences of women before me, I am reminded of the sacrifices my 93 year old grandmother made. Pre-pandemic, I'd lie next to her on a single beaten mattress, seeking solace in watching her bent arthritic fingers knit as she'd relay stories of the partition and meeting my late grandfather. Since 2020, I have not been able to cross the border, see her, nor smell the kewda essence she taught me to use while making our family mutton curry.

Over the pandemic, I found myself frequenting emptied parks and lots that once bustled with strangers. I'd always been the kind of person who'd talk to strangers, someone who reveled in anonymity. Now, my greatest fear of the pandemic plays out before me as people have grown increasingly untrusting, studying the upper quadrant of my masked face as I ask for the most essential needs. After three years of a pandemic and several national crises, communities feel more divided: people seem more aggressive and anonymity has no place in a society bent on asserting difference upon difference. But other forms of mutual trust have surfaced in lieu of that which is ruptured: solidarity economies, collective actions, community food banks, trade unions, open source development, women-led rebellions and self-determining institutional structures (like Bird Show) keep us rooted in local acts of cooperation.

I shake out words to validate my being, turning and tumulting till I can be situated- yet unbound from the specific roles expected of me. Like an aunt who claims to know you after 30 odd years (but only ever held you when you had no words to speak), foreign societies tend to oversimplify the imagination and capacity of transplanted bodies like mine. Stringing together words to wrench meaning from the sterility of external conditions, I have finally given myself permission to journey, internally. New meanings have started to emerge in the greenhouse of my interiority. Reexamining, reintegrating and relooking under the right conditions, I am starting to build space for a more resolved version of who I am without the baggage of the past.

STEP 3: PLACE IN THE SUN WITH LIGHT OR NO COVERING. MONITOR

Reiterating a narrative arc from my parents' attempt at immigrating, there are moments where my character grows outside the parameters of the misshapen box handed down to me. Like disorderly roots pushing through the holes at the bottom of an outgrown pot, I am the first generation privileged enough to assert my thirst for something more- something greater- than what was allowed. Writing in first-person, I am exposed: fascinating and distressing those around me no matter what I do. I struggle with decisions not of my own- decisions made on my behalf by those closest to me- and question if we ever can truly be a 'whole' version of ourselves here. The struggle of growing roots where planted involves having to articulate your experience in a language not-of-your-own, in frameworks that expectorate any unclear or unfamiliar movements or maneuvers. Moving through the world of *musts* and *must-nots*, it takes time to liberate oneself. Redefining and realigning an idea of home into something interior rather than exterior, a world of space opens up in the exoskeleton- space to expand and to offer the world.



Living and working in Chicago, unable to visit Bombay, I've started to take the shirt of past identities off, to sit in the sun of possibilities...

Who would I be, if not a daughter, a girlfriend, wife or mother within my family?

Can we collectively build a healthier ecosystem, a reciprocal Art World?

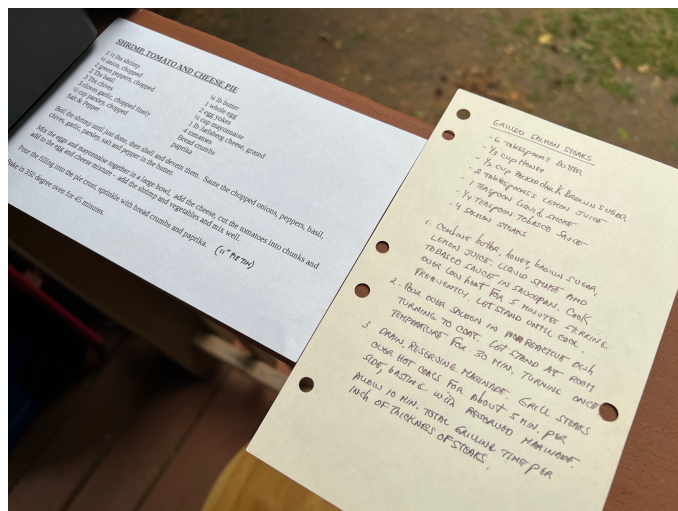
Can the aspirations of the collective supercede that of the individual?

How can we consider the universal without erasing the granularity of the particular?

Swinging between the sacrifices of generations before me and aspirations of a better future- the present feels splintered. Watching American freedom and democracy convulse and spasm post-2016, I feel compelled to shift my identity outside the framework and gravitate towards collective actions. I try to put roots into shifting soil.

I began advocating more directly for my friends. I wrestled my own biases: admitting to playing out patterns my parents would never admit to and making time to carefully examine how to respect the past while building a future within the margins. At 39, I value receiving constructive criticism, practicing non-judgement, and preserving the constant ability to unlearn. I am still learning the fine art of gracious refusal, as I still seek self-acceptance in and through my work. With cheeks sore from smiling, I'm working on not fanning the embers of low self-esteem. "Can a life in service to others also involve a certain amount of service to my *self*?" I ponder over my daily morning call to my mother. She laughs, "You've become so American, thinking of yourself and your feelings all the time." I take this as a healthy sign of no longer devaluing my needs. "At least I'm making time to look at it, right?" I quip, aware of the sacrifices she made. How does a flower bloom knowing the earth has been scorched before her? It is unclear how nature finds her flows- fading each winter, healing each spring, reanimating herself on ancestral land that doesn't find the need to articulate these complicated truths. Tapping in on the nutrients that sit on the top layer of soil, I'm reminded of the unyielding principle of regeneration after a fire. The world is absurd, and as fires continually rage, there are daily reminders of interconnectedness- like a small voice in the inner drum of Tulika's ear that wants (or maybe even needs) her to propagate and share a part of nature with peers, friends and relatives.

Erin's penchant for preparing meals as abstract expressions premised on each artists' cultural lineage is an act of capacity building. She ruffles through a box of recipe cards passed down from an uncle, Kevin. Reaching into filial history, she excavates a card for the perfect Caesar Salad. Outside, on the porch, a line of saplings take root in square glass dishes precariously balancing on a long wooden rail. Bearing witness to them taking root, lessons in patience, commitment, faith, protection, remediation, and regeneration come to light. Like tendrils, they draw their own boundaries and conditions to come into the world.





A newfound vitality is formed on a 21.5" x 21.5" table at the far corner of the porch, where Tulika's ceramic sculptural vases correspond to the fleshness of her womb. Pointing to an act of rising above one's identity while acknowledging its power, her compulsion to nurture and to share the process of nurturance is a commitment to extending compassion to those, who like her, have had to lose parts of themselves to find their being outside the double bind of cultural expectation and assimilation.

Tulika's mother, visiting from Bombay after three years of forced separation, turns to me and says, "We grow plants in our balcony in Bombay all the time. We've never looked at it as 'Art'- we just keep doing...", waving her hand in circles in the air by her face. I recognize this as the motion of wheels that keep on turning. I think of how certain mindsets take generations to release- of the neurotic 'doing' that keeps my mother from addressing her own healing. I think of how difficult it is to assure Tulika's daughter, Reyna, of a perfect future on a foggy horizon. Serving myself a slice of Indian herb spiced bake, I quietly absorb the afternoon light nourishing saplings who may or may not take root; Re-remembering what it means to be part of a family, an ecosystem, and letting go of feelings that no longer accurately describe me, I'm woken from my post-brunch haze by a small, eager hand on my arm. "Pia *masi*, help me make a band for my paper facemask?" I smile and gladly oblige, taping loose red strings from Erin's overhead fiber studio to a torn sheet of paper embellished with red and black hearts. How children learn to cope with disaster through play never fails to amaze me.

As the world awaits healing, it's the in-between states- gasps of air between suppressed fears- that allow us to question more deeply what it means to relocate people and communities onto

unfamiliar soil. Under unregulated conditions, or even controlled trials like this, finding roots can be particularly difficult- sometimes near impossible if functional roles and interrelationships misalign. Genetic diversity may even be lost. But in a protective habitat like Bird Show, natural and rare species can reliably experiment, and potentially survive or even thrive... safely anchoring roots when the conditions are *just* right.

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