

## Housewife Yoga

\*Part of the collection “To the Sky,” recipient of the 2017 Hopwood Award for Creative

### Nonfiction

Fourteen sets of eyes close. Fourteen chests rise and fall in syncopation. Fourteen pairs of hands sweep through humid air toward the floor. Fourteen mouths chant ancient sanskrit verses with matching notes, with varying timbre. Fourteen pairs of feet root themselves to the earth like the *neem* tree whose branches reach through the window in salutation. Fourteen spines straighten in release of the tendencies that force them to curve toward the ground. Fourteen bodies lie prostrate on woven mats. My eyes are open.

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The housewives of Pondicherry are employed in a full time job with no monetary gain. These women must rise before the sun and fall asleep long after the stars have mapped themselves in the sky. They have their schedules seared into their memory by the lashing tongues of their husbands. Day in, day out. Executing chores, cooking, commands. The housewives of Pondicherry are the gears spinning familial machines. The housewives are the oil, the chains, the production lines. The housewives are everywhere and nowhere. The housewives are clockwork.

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Fourteen housewives gather to breathe. I’m the fifteenth — their unmarried, sunburned, and inflexible counterpart. Pondicherry’s International School of Yoga is located in a residential cross street, tucked just off of the bustling main road that runs through the heart of the city. Building number twenty-five, where the housewives stretch, is in the heart of Tamil Quarter. It is

the area reserved for Pondicherry's working class. The area where people don't live in excess, the area where people have enough. Every Saturday morning the housewives meet for one hour of yoga. Some use repurposed towels, others woven mats. Some are young, barely older than I. Some are wise, with bags under their eyes. All have dedicated their lives to serving. Except for me, but I am here.

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Doctor Lilatha leads the group. Her mat is placed in front of the open doors of the veranda. Natural light floats into the room through windows, the door, and the brightly colored *kurtas* that the housewives wear. The class begins with gentle stretching. The women effortlessly glide toward their mats. Their muscles obey them. They breathe in unison kissing the air with their delicate exhalations.

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Me, I try with all the strength my body will allow, to hold in the laughter that wants to erupt from deep within me. My skin reeks of whiteness and everyone in the room can smell it. So I don't laugh. But I want to laugh. I want to laugh at the way the tightness of my muscles shakes my body like it's exorcising a demon. I want to laugh at how irrelevant my chest is compared to the women in the room, whose bosoms have fed many mouths and hang toward the floor in down dog. I want to laugh at their local gossip that I can't understand. I want to laugh at the name of the class; housewife yoga. But I don't laugh, because I'm not a housewife. They welcomed me.

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Doctor Lilatha begins to chant in sanskrit. The room of Tamil speakers knows every word. The women close their eyes and place their hands over their hearts in reverence. The chant rides the soft morning breeze out the window, past the tree, down the cobblestone road, into the heart of the city. I know this because I watch. I keep my eyes open. I see the passion on the lips that form each word. I see the breeze sweep the words away before they can echo. I see them.

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Doctor Lilatha worries about me. It concerns her that my muscles don't move like those of the fourteen women around the room. She pushes on my back and tries to force it into positions it doesn't know how to hold. The women around me, their backs know. They use breath to ease into postures, to hold them and find comfort. My breath is sharp, it sounds like the rattle of an engine; of a failing engine. These women breathe for me, around me, with me.

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Longer held poses turn into vinyasa flows, into movement. I can flow with these women. My body knows how to move, not the way theirs move, but there's motion. Doctor Lilatha wants to teach me real yoga, not the American kind. She worries that my body can't bend right. Doctor Lilatha told me to come to the housewives class on Saturday morning. She didn't tell me that the women would place their mats around me. That they would hold me with their eyes closed. That they know how to care for other people.

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Fourteen sets of eyes watch their curries simmer on the stove. Fourteen chests rise and fall to fast paced heartbeats. Fourteen pairs of hands wash tin dishes. Fourteen mouths bite tongues while husbands lash out with theirs. Fourteen pairs of feet walk to pick their children up

from the government school. Fourteen spines bend over the clothes as they scrub the dirt from the seams. Fourteen bodies lie exhausted. My eyes are open.

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