



*“When the dirt was under my nails, when I would smell those blooms, I would exist just for that moment,” he confesses, “to listen . . . I would get a feeling . . . of standing just the other side of paradise.”*

# Other Side of Paradise

Atreyee Gupta

“I USED TO HAVE THESE IN MY garden,” he says, studying the courtyard magnolias. “Mine were twice the size.”

“I know,” I answer, though he exaggerates. The rolling mists unveil bits of distant hills in faded ink. He shuffles away, mumbling, hands behind his back. I sigh, staring into the jade pond, deep and still.

“Perhaps this wasn’t the best idea,” I tell

myself. He’s upset that we sold the house since he can no longer manage it. The rest of us don’t want the bother of looking after an antique residence, a yard, an old man. He’s more hurt that the real estate developer will cement over his flower beds. As recompense, we gifted him a garden tour of Suzhou, his bucket list destination. I drew the short stick as escort.

I catch up with him along the pebbled

path, slide my arm into the crook of his. "You've got nice grounds at the senior facility," I say.

"Manicured," he answers. "They don't let you touch the plants."

"Less work for you," I argue.

"They don't know the first thing about it. Think lots of burnt lawn and a few shrubs makes a garden. I told them they should replace the grass with drought-resistant cover, but no one listens to me."

I soothe him. "Everybody's got their version of beauty."

"It's not for dilettantes. You need an intimacy with *terroir* to build a garden . . . and labor . . . and patience."

We sit on a bench inside the pavilion. Fog tufts waft past us, in their wake exposing delicate watercolor scenes: rustling bamboo, rockeries, a crescent bridge. "Bask in the beauty," I tell him. "You don't have to worry about anything here, you can appreciate other people's efforts."

"Pfft. They should worry about not having a better irrigation system," he counters, "and the myrtle leaves are bitten. Wonder what pest that is."

A handyman in a conical hat sweeps the bonsai pots. His rhythmic swoops provide a gentle cadence in the hushed surroundings.

"I could've done something similar," he says, pointing to the ornamental dwarfs. "but it's artifice." He waves his fingers in the air. "Too much hubris here, rich thinking they were Masters of the Garden, wanting to alter the landscape. A garden should embody wilderness, be a riot of color, a

profusion of growth. Mine was an homage to nature."

I hide a smile. For all the hours he spent in his grounds, it remained a chaotic patch.

His thumb rubs against his forefinger in rapid circles. "I'm cold," he complains, then, "I'm tired."

"This was a mistake," I repeat to myself. I recognize touring someone else's gardens is frustrating him.

"We can head to the hotel," I say.

"No. You paid good money for the ticket. We'll see the rest of the property." He rises. We meander our way through the maze of semi-enclosed spaces, each wall and portal peeling back like onion skin to reveal a miniature universe. I mention how the lacquered gates shimmer and note the aesthetic dip of a curved tile roof. In response he criticizes the soil moisture and excessive use of eroded stone.

We pass by a pine grove whose mottled silver trunks contort into eerie forms. He pauses.

The breeze croons above the branches. I prick my ears, convinced I can almost make out the lyrics. "Long I have lived hampered by the bars of a cage: Now I empty myself to Nature and Freedom," he whispers.

"What's that?" I ask, surprised by his recitation.

He shakes his head. "Nonsense."

"Did you come up with that just now?"

He chuckles. "Sometimes verses would appear to me in my garden. I would think 'I must write this down,' but the nasturtiums would distract me. They were always such devils to take care of."

I stay silent. I never knew he had poetry in him. We arrive back at the pond as if it's





a refrain—all routes seem to culminate here, the center, the beginning and end of realization.

“This is a fine place,” he murmurs, “I can hear the music of the trees again. Thank you for bringing me.”

I feel equal parts pleased and guilty. “I heard it too,” I tell him. “I heard the music too!”

He nods. “All true gardens have it. When the dirt was under my nails, when I would

smell those blooms, I would exist just for that moment,” he confesses, “to listen . . . I would get a feeling . . . of standing just the other side of paradise. I’ve not felt it since . . . now in the woods . . .”

My throat tightens with sorrow. “I’m sorry,” I blurt out. “I’m sorry you lost your poetry. I wish I’d known . . . I’m sorry we did nothing to save your garden.”

He draws my hand into his arm, pats it brusquely. “Funny . . . of all the people and

things I’ve lost, not having my little plot has been the hardest,” he says.

I grasp at alternatives. “Maybe there’s a community garden you could join?”

He shrugs. “Yes, maybe.”

“Or you could apply for a planning job . . . keep your hand in . . . become their Master of the Gardens.”

He chuckles, pats my hand again. “First lesson: the garden is always the master. It has its way. I’m merely a steward.”

I laugh. “You should tell ‘em that! Show ‘em how to put the music back.”

He looks at me. “You wouldn’t make a bad gardener.”

I grin. “You think?”

“What you need is stamina. I could teach you. We’d start with some botany.”

We depart arm in arm. I match my step to his. The slightest of ripples breaks across the jade pond’s mirrored surface. ❖