

You Are White, They Think

written by Guest Contributor | March 27, 2017



Your race is in the room and it is threatening. No one can see it, to name it. They claim you're like them, because it makes the conversation comfortable. Someone discusses the World War and everyone shuts up. It is a white man. A good white man. He talks of another's family, how her relatives were captured. Everyone is mesmerized by the good white man—this conversation of epigenetics and how this descendant was afflicted.

You think of your own Dutch grandfather, part of the Resistance. How he trained for the Elfstedentocht, while Rotterdam prepared to burn. How your great-uncles, captured by Nazis, all escaped alive. How your Opa managed a consistent Houdini act, out the balcony window down a rope into the courtyard during the raids that lined the fathers/sons alongside a church for execution (sometimes before their pregnant wives).

But you are here in your medical school, again, and everyone is practicing empathy except it's not. Empathy is born of experience and no one is interested in yours. It is so close, that they could brush up against it. Knock its coffee over, have it spill into their morning and they are not prepared for this.

If you bring up your personal history, go to page 13 (Spoiler alert: this page is blank as the reflection on the faces of your supervisors, peers as they redirect the conversation to them and their feelings).

If you continue to sip your coffee, proceed.

The guy who does/does not wear the kilt at school, the one who implies you should go get a drink with him (even though you have a boyfriend), the guy who always reminds you of the time you accidentally revealed too much on a morning shift, because the necessity to keep your stories in check at all times became overwhelming, this one asks if you know how much you discuss your cultures. Is it the only thing that matters to you, he asks, while he is or is not wearing anything below the belt.

You are in the same room as the one with the good white man. There are several good white men this morning. Another one speaks of the tsunami, an incredible story of spirit, bravery, a lesson on surrender. This—the

topic—seconds after the exploration of Holocaust.

You remember that Christmas, how the lines were dead for days as your dad called home to Kerala to ascertain whether your family was—

You are Indian. You are $\frac{1}{2}$ Indian.

Eventually, you will learn.

Your family survived the waves. Vacationing on the shore, they fled. 300,000 went missing.

On the very white island, where you live, they cobble together a tsunami relief fundraiser. No one invites you or (to your knowledge) any Indian/South Asian writer to read at this event. The white people are thinking of those in Sri Lanka, India.

No one is thinking of you.

You leave your body a little more each day to make everyone else safe.

You are white, they think.

If you tell them you aren't, they walk around you in circles. They ask for proof.

You say you love proofs, as in geometry.

If you flip through your I-phone to locate a photo of you when your melanin was expressing, turn to page 40 (Cue: Oh, my God! How is that you? Cue: your further departure.)

If you call out this microaggression, flip to page 1. (Prepare for: I don't understand. I'm just telling the truth. You don't look Indian.)

If you have the energy to explain how there is a thought below this thought and they should really examine their thoughts, before they speak, flip to page 13. (Yes, page 13. It is always about them and their feelings.)

They are thinking of their recent trip they took to Indonesia. They are charming the room with Bali, stories of abject poverty they experienced on a layover.

They do not want to hear about your grandmother. They want to show you snaps of themselves dressed up in saris with bindis, how they have fresh henna.

See how much they love you? So much that some of them have assumed Indian names. Everyone will call them this—their chosen Indian name out of respect. This is love. They swear. They swear and you are white like they, they say this. Hey, don't you know it's rude not to listen to them while they are speaking? They are always speaking.

*Elfstendentocht refers to the Eleven City Tour, which is an approximate 120 mile ice skating event that only occurs when it's cold enough for the waters to freeze from Northern to Southern Netherlands. The Canterlandse bridge *It Sil Heve* mosaic in Friesland commemorates speed skaters, such as my Opa (A. G. Boxman), who successfully completed this competition.



Natasha Kochicheril Moni, a first-generation American born to native Dutch and Indian parents, writes and resides in the Pacific Northwest. Natasha's first full-length poetry collection, *The Cardiologist's Daughter*, was released by Two Sylvias Press in 2014. Her poetry, fiction, essays, and reviews have been published in over fifty-five journals including: The Rumpus, Magma, Verse, DIAGRAM, [PANK], Hobart, Indiana Review, and Fourteen Hills. She holds a BA in Child Development from Tufts University, received her Post-baccalaureate pre-medical education from Mills College, and is a licensed naturopathic doctor in WA State.