

Questions for the great-grandfather I never met

Loshni Nair

mutacha, i have, for you, a question. maybe more.

what did you envision as you left behind the luscious, green fields of Palakkad?

did you memorise the smell of the long, muddy rivers?

did you savour your last mouthful of freshly caught fish, lathered in turmeric and salt, deep-fried,
sitting cross-legged on cold cement floors?

or did the excitement of a brick house and tarred roads instead, prompt you to make haste?

did you hurriedly pack alver silver tumblers in rusted boxes borrowed from eager neighbours,
excited at the prospect of a family, migrating!

all the way to malaysia, they are going!

mutacha, i have, for you, a question. maybe more.

did your heart pound with optimism as you set foot in soft new soil,
greeted by rotting huts and manure,

outdoor toilets with jagged circles dug in the ground for all of nature's calls?

did you memorise the image of the long, saggy udders as you milked the cows,
the youngest of your children tugging on your sarong,

ready to contribute to the household earnings at the ripe, old age of 5?

did you, on your deathbed, wish you had never exchanged the greenery of Palakkad

for a land that refused to *see* you,

for a land that still refuses to *see* us?

do you listen when mutima tells me about the time you came back

asking her chechi to bring you your mundu, for a shower, in the darkness of the night?

she died a week later.

they say you took her, to be with you.

do you think to yourself sometimes,

Palakkad would have kept all of you,

every single one of you, alive. for just a little longer.