

Afterword

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In the second sentence of “A Week-End,” the opening story of this volume, the narrator says, “I am here,” and repeats herself, just one paragraph later: “Yes, I am here.” The narrator is Tara, a young Indian woman newly arrived from Calcutta (now Kolkata), studying at a midwestern college. Bharati Mukherjee herself was a graduate student at the University of Iowa when she wrote this story for her MFA thesis, still in her early twenties, also a recent arrival from Calcutta. Having grown up privileged and overprotected in a large Brahmin family (Mukherjee once said she wasn’t allowed to walk down a street alone until she was twenty years old), one might imagine her reading these words aloud as she typed them on the page—*I am here, yes, I am here*—a statement of disbelief and wonder, tinged with uncertainty and hope.

Given the body of work to come—eight novels, a book of nonfiction, two short story collections, and now, finally, this book of her collected stories—I suspect Mukherjee, if perhaps subconsciously, wrote these lines as a kind of insistence, a demand that her presence in America—a destiny of her own willful making—be acknowledged as vital and necessary, as integral to the American reality as any other American’s, immigrant or otherwise. It’s a familiar, frustrating, and powerful feeling, this yearning for recognition, to know with absolute certainty that you belong.

For a long time, I didn’t know I’d felt this way myself.

I was a junior at UC Berkeley when I picked up a copy of Mukherjee’s second story collection, *The Middleman and Other Stories*. She was my professor at the time (to fulfill a graduation requirement, I took her “History of the Short Story” class), and one freezing night,

sitting in the kitchen of my non-heated Oakland apartment, I started reading “Fighting for the Rebound,” the fifth story in the book. Barely half a page in, I read this: “Blanquita speaks six languages, her best being Tagalog, Spanish, and American...Back in Manila, she took a crash course in making nice to Americans, before her father sent her over. In her family they called her Baby.”

Two words jumped out at me: *Tagalog* and *Baby*. Tagalog, of course, is the most commonly spoken language in the Philippines, which my parents and older siblings spoke at home (raised in California, in English, I couldn’t speak it myself). And I grew up around women who called themselves Baby, a common Filipino nickname.

I read to the end. Though Blanquita wasn’t the protagonist (she was the girlfriend of the narrator, a money manager named Griff), she was vividly alive on the page, a hopeless romantic not above playing relationship mind games (“You don’t love me, Griff”). She was brash, melodramatic, exasperating, memorable.

She was also the first Filipino character I’d seen in American fiction.

The realization was thrilling: to see a Filipino on the page, even one whose life was nothing like my own, felt like the best kind of familiarity; fiction had never felt so real. But I was deeply troubled too. My whole life I’d been a reader, so why had it taken so long to see a Filipino in the pages of the stories and books I’d read and loved? That absence was palpable now, that sense of missing-ness suddenly—painfully—visible in books, TV, movies, politics—the means of my participation and investment in American culture, *my* culture.

I felt like screaming: *I’m here*.

I took a fiction workshop with Bharati Mukherjee the following semester. My stories read, as one student pointed out, like immigrant-tragedies-of-the-week, in which dark immigrant secrets were revealed on page nine, formulaically resolved by page twelve. In one particularly rough session, Mukherjee had one positive comment to say about my story, which was about a young immigrant woman forced to sell her baby sister while (for reasons I fortunately cannot recall) struggling for an A in her drama class. “I love the characters’ names,” Mukherjee said, a way of being honest without being brutal. If her teaching style was often diplomatic, she was always practical, pinpointing where a story succeeded, where it fell flat. Though it was a political rallying cry that inspired my stories—*We are immigrants! We are here!*—Mukherjee didn’t overemphasize the political implications of our work, or the authorial visions behind it. Instead, she brought our focus to the page, showing us how the right words, sentences, and scenes, could transform mere text into something close to real-time experience.

She could be wonderfully blunt. Once, a classmate asked what it was like being a student at the famed Iowa Writer’s Workshop. “You’ve got to have a hard ass,” she said, and though I wasn’t *exactly* sure what she meant (*be tough? be stubborn?*), I wrote it down anyway. When we learned that she was giving a reading for her new novel, *The Holder of the World*, at Cody’s Books in Berkeley, we asked if we should show up extra early to beat the crowds. “I’m not Anne Rice,” she said, glasses low on her face, and left it at that. She shared stories about elevator run-ins with Billy Idol and John Ritter, about shopping trips for a punk rock leather outfit to play “Princess Bubbles,” a backup singer for the Stephen King/Amy Tan band, The Rock Bottom Remainders. For our final class, she invited us to her San Francisco flat. I’d never been inside the home of an actual *writer* before, much less a *flat*, and I’d imagined memorizing the titles the books on her shelves, stealing glances of her notebooks and rough drafts, anything

instructive for becoming a brilliant writer. Instead, I found myself lingering in the corner of her kitchen, watching her prepare an Indian meal for my seventeen classmates and me. I was still intimidated by her, too awkward and shy to make real conversation, but right before we sat down to eat, I pulled my camera from my backpack, worked up the courage to ask if I could take her photo. “Of course,” she said, then turned from the boiling pot and smiled, wooden spoon in hand. I still have that picture.

I wasn’t a good writer, but under Mukherjee’s guidance, I was becoming a better one. I focused more on the craft, less on the art. I learned that real labor—the hard work of scenes, sentences, words—was more in my control than any grand authorial vision or political message.

I learned from her outside the classroom, too.

Of course, I read all her stories. *The Middleman* was already like a bible to me, and her first story collection, *Darkness*, was another masterclass in the short form, the stories sharp and spare, surprising in their emotional breadth (one story in the collection, “Saints,” narrated by a teen-aged boy, was a direct influence on “Superassassin” the first story I ever published). I spent days and nights at the Berkeley library, hunting down any article or essay she’d written, every interview she’d done. One evening, on a microfiche copy (yes, *microfiche*—this was pre-Internet, after all) of *The New York Times Book Review*, I found her essay, “Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!” in which she wrote, ““All around me I see the face of America changing. So do you, if you live in cities, teach in universities, ride public transport. But where, in fiction, do you read of it? Who, in other words, speaks for us, the new Americans from nontraditional immigrant countries? Which is another way of saying, in this altered America, who speaks for you?”

Later, I learned she did an interview with Bill Moyers and that—*eureka!*—the library had a VHS copy (again, pre-Internet). I checked it out immediately, watched it again and again: at one point in the conversation, she rejects the myth of the melting pot, preferring to see America as a “fusion chamber,” one in which, “you and I are both radically changed by the presence of new immigrants.” *Fusion chamber!* It made perfect sense: I imagined America as an enormous Plexiglas capsule, lights crackling and gamma rays firing, the whole population inside in mid-mutual-transformation, an idea she discussed in an interview with *Mother Jones*: “. . . my literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed me. It does not end until I show that I (along with the hundreds of thousands of immigrants like me) am minute by minute transforming America.”

Mukherjee’s words, written or spoken, were like a mantra—a way to live, a reason to write. Looking back, you might even say that I was obsessed with Bharati Mukherjee. But *obsessed* isn’t the right word; I admired but didn’t idolize her—Berkeley in the 90’s kept me too cynical for that—nor was I a kind of literary fanboy. What might have been an obsession was, in its truest, uttermost form, *inspiration*, a word whose rampantly sentimental overuse has nearly rendered it meaningless. But if inspiration really is *the power of moving the intellect or emotions*, then that’s what Mukherjee’s work was for me. Her short stories, particularly those in *The Middleman*, jumpstarted my brain, helped me see the vitality and urgency of the contemporary immigrant story, and that my own fiction, about Filipinos and Filipino-Americans in America, could have a place in the American literary mainstream and, maybe, if I was lucky, perhaps even change it, one story at a time.

A few years after graduating from Berkeley, I applied to MFA Programs in Creative Writing; Mukherjee kindly agreed to write me a letter of recommendation, even took the time to

read my writing sample, a short story I'd written specifically for the application. "You are the heir," she told me after reading it. We were in her office at Berkeley, and for a millisecond I wanted to burst out of my chair from the thrill of validation, and the belief that she was somehow passing along a baton to me, trusting me with the responsibility of carrying out her own literary vision. But I fell back to earth just as quickly, realizing that her statement was mostly a kindness, a bit of encouragement and wish of good luck. But perhaps it was acknowledgement too, her understanding of how much she'd meant to me—as writer, teacher, immigrant, American—both inside the classroom and out, and from the kitchen corner in her flat in San Francisco.

I might not be *the heir*, but in the hopes that my students might be, I pass along Mukherjee's stories to them, too.

The immigrant's story, I tell them, possesses the tenets of character-driven narrative. There is the inherent before and after that comes with leaving one home and arriving in another, and with that, the possibility for change, for better or worse, however great or small. The immigrant's story often culminates in a measure of gain against loss and, just like life, can never truly be resolved. At best, it might linger with possibility, making us question everything that's come before, and what might lie ahead.

"The Management of Grief." "Saints." "A Wife's Story." "The Tenant." "A Father." So many others. Mukherjee's stories are among the finest examples of the short form itself, and enduring proof of the vitality and potency of the immigrant story. In a time when people are claiming singular definitions of what it means to be American, when the power of identity is being misused for separatist gains, we need her stories now, more than ever.

How lucky we are, then, to have them gathered in a single volume, to be with Mukherjee's characters, these vibrant, brilliant, foolish, gutsy, unforgettable individuals who cross over and say to the world, to themselves, *I am here, yes, I am here.*

And to the reader: *So are you.*