

Adult Short Story
Third Place

Falling/Flying
By Mohini Mahlotra

When we left New York, I was 3, and had never known any other home. We were going back to Nepal, and en route we stopped in Delhi to see my mom's side of the family. She was from Delhi, before she married my father. I remember we played hide and seek every night when the lights went out. I remember sirens, and the phrase *bombs may fall*, whispered many times, and every night when the lights went dark and the sirens came on, we ran to corners of the living room in my grandparents' home. My mother tucked me into the pleats of her sari, and the folded pleats fell like mini ripples, and I stayed still between the ripples, and giggled when my sisters and cousins from different corners in the pitch-dark hissed *bombs*, I wished every night could be like this forever. The grown-ups talked about war, that India and Pakistan were fighting, again, and I thought war was such a fun game.

I fell out of a window from the third floor when I was 4. My sisters and I had just been wading in the river that ran by our house in Nepal, eating wild berries that stained our lips and tongues deep purple. They were downstairs, and I was with my mother, eating jam on toast and it must have been strawberry since that was my favorite kind, and I was leaning against a bar in the window that came loose and so tumbled out, did the only backflip I have ever done, and then, I was told, I sounded like a meteorite hitting earth. My mother screamed so loudly the whole neighborhood heard her, and the lady who lived to the right of us described how she saw me tangled in the electrical wires outside the window, and *thank god* there was a constant power failure in Nepal, or I would have fried and sizzled in white sparks of snapping electricity like sometimes happens to pigeons, and their grey feathers flutter and sputter and make a mess on the ground. *No, no, she sounded more like a sonic boom*, argued the neighbor who lived to our left. I was wearing green shorts my sister said, her new green shorts to be precise, and I remember thinking that it was such a shame that I couldn't remember what falling or flying felt like.

We stood on the ledge outside my bedroom window. We'd moved to Bangkok for my dad's job and lived in an apartment building. My new best friend in middle school and I, we were 12, and we stood on this narrow ledge, our feet sideways it was that narrow, our backs straight up against the building. A fall would be straight and sharp to the ground, which stared up at us tauntingly from eight floors below. She said I was nervous and she dared me to look down but I wouldn't. She said she dared me to take the cigarette in one hand but mine were plastered against the wall and I didn't dare lift one off. She reminded me of this when we met up for coffee not long ago, that we went on the ledge because we wanted to smoke and it was the

safest place to do so away from the parents. I remember like it was yesterday that I started to panic and babble about falling and flying and would I be saved twice, that was asking for too much wasn't it.

Today is my mother's birthday. She would have been 85. I remember her by wearing a sari and trying to fold the pleats to fall like little ripples. Yesterday, 17 years ago, my father's ashes swept down a river, the same river my sisters and I played in. Birth and death unite. In Nepal, when someone dies, we say *they fell*. I say, they flew.