

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

Lavanya Arora  
**The Lucky Ones**

### *Wasp*

The men in my family are born without wings. So, they do everything in their power to clip the wings of the women in my family. Our wings aren't feathered, mind you. After all, we are insects. Our translucent wings reflect light into an iridescent melancholy. At least the wings of those who manage to burrow through the slush of dead bodies of the men of our family, find the exact millimeter-wide spot to crawl out of the otherwise impenetrable membrane of the fig fruit, and aren't attacked by sentry ants while they dry themselves on the fig's fuzzy launch pad.

Then comes the flight.

I was fortunate enough to be one of those who flew away. Well, would you call it *fortunate* if I had no control over my decisions even after being free?

I blame the symbiosis. This dependence on another.

I breathed in the new fig's hormones a few moments into my one and only flight. They were floating nonchalantly in microcurrents between the tree and the building, as if their entire life was one stretched-out pool party. Naturally, I was driven towards their source. Something in my epigenetic memory must have clicked, as the scientists say. The fig tree had told me all about them and their experiments on its other branches while I was still just an egg. That soft thing. Its memory now so distant, as if it were someone else's.



### *The Scientist*

The Scientist shrugs off his white labcoat while getting out of a laboratory lined with off-white equipment that range from being mouse- to bear-sized. He flings the coat on a metal hanger just outside the door and heads out of the building, carrying a transparent polybag filled with neatly folded white polybags. He rings a woman six years younger than him and says, "Our spot. 5 minutes." She glows at the thought of something being just theirs, unaware of being the twelfth person the Scientist has introduced to the same spot for the same reasons.

First, bagging the figs' inflorescence. The woman fishes for labels from under the folded polybags, takes a few out. She scribbles the date and time on one of them, and hands it over to The Scientist, who's up on the ladder, eager for this laborious step of the process to end, holding his tongue between his teeth.

Second, nestling together in the meagre space between the trunk of the tree and the pale yellow boundary wall of the abandoned hostel. Get a kiss or two, if the day's bad. Take the impromptu assistant back home, if it's great. And everything else, the in-between. Soon enough, the frequency of these meetings dwindles.

As the fig tree gets ready for its next fruiting cycle, a new label-maker

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accompanies The Scientist. Sometimes a man, sometimes a woman. What stays constant is the routine.

The fig tree admires that, and only that, about The Scientist.

Perhaps even The Scientist is driven by the same genetic need as the tree, the wasps, and the ants. His life dependent on the dance of mating under the fig tree's shade as much as the wasps' lives are within the fig fruits.



### *Fig Tree*

Thousands of years of sameness. I bear thousands of children every few months after sensing heat and humidity in the air, the presence of water underneath. Who can bear children without any fluids, you tell me?

Things didn't change around me for ages. Same friends to hang out with, same insects to protect myself from, same sun and moon, same clouds, same rain, same soil, same change of seasons.

Life was utopic.

Until humans arrived.

Regardless, I quite admire their inventiveness. Even if it rises from ignorance or repetitiveness. I mean, look at my case. There I was, existing for millions of years without any labels. And then they arrived, looked at me, and went, "Ah! This one we'll call a fig tree!"

Who gave them permission to give me a name? Or to club me with other trees I didn't even remember knowing. Just so that they could dissect me in the name of their divisive knowledge, and whether I could be helpful to them in any manner.

They even climbed on me to mate, chiselled my bark to declare their love. The at least their names would stay together long enough. Then they could think about lost loves in old age. This act of reminiscing, their only superpower. Through it, I suppose, they'd feel the same thrill of first love, the same hope of being forever young and in love with the same person, as crores before them must have felt during their small, insignificant lives.

At least the macaques ate my fruit and helped spread my seeds far and wide. The humans should learn from the monkeys what a healthy reciprocal relationship looks like.

I've been engulfing the carvings of those old humans on my higher branches for a few decades now; in a few more, while those humans are no more, the carvings will become a part of my ringed interiority.



### *Wasp*

After I landed on the new fig, I started digging in with haste, afraid that the ants would hunt me down before I got a chance to lay these eggs. I dug faster than my wings had flapped while I flew against the microcurrents and finally made my way through.

Now burrowed in the new fig's warmth, I'm grateful.

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For a while, I mostly just wander around inside it, smelling all the new but somehow familiar smells. Pollen from my pocket falls into the female flowers without my consent. After all, it got deposited on me without consent too.

Wait, if an ancestor of mine signed a genetic contract with the ancestor of a tree millions of years ago, does consent of the later generations cease to exist entirely? Life's too short to get any solid answers. Maybe one of my daughters will inherit the memory of this question and keep the quest alive. The wingless men of my family will rush outside this fig right before my daughters. They will offer themselves up as sacrifice to the wrath of the ants while my daughters dry themselves on the fig's fuzzy launch pad like I once did.

For now, I have to find a suitable spot.

I have to lay these eggs. Soon.

I can foresee myself dissolving in a matter of hours.



### *Fig tree*

I've been declared a miracle, did I tell you?

The humans branded me religious because they thought I produce fruits while skipping the whole flowering business. The identity of those who can't argue their space and presence in the world get stamped with easy-to-digest symbols by them.

They're so hungry for symbols, for meaning, that they turn me, a tree, into a symbol too, and worship it while eradicating nearby forests without a thought. Even their buildings tire out in protest, develop cracks. No wonder they need me, the miracle, to save them. Never in their lakhs and lakhs of years could they think of cutting me down.



### *Fig Sac with the Wasp Inside*

It's not nice, is it? The bloody wasps lay eggs in me and now there's a whole gall bubbling inside. If only I could shout "Cancer! Cancer!" and run around the forest floor but this tree won't let me go until it is what it calls "the right time." Bloody oaf. And the wasp! Bloody died on the spot, it did. Take some responsibility for your children, you ingrate.

What do I get out of this whole ordeal? What do my hundreds of flowers get out of it? My beautiful little babies. Absolutely nothing. They'll transform into fruits! Can you believe it?

It's all the bloody oaf's fault, I tell you. It wants to spread itself to more trees further and further away, so it uses me, the wasp, the birds, the ants, and the monkeys. The bloody monkeys, can you believe it? They poop its seeds all over and there it is, a new baby oaf ready to manipulate the soil, starting the entire cycle of life and death again.

It's not nice at all, is it? What if I don't want to turn into a fruit? Develop seeds?

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Did anyone ever bother asking me or my beautiful baby flowers about what we want? My precious babies, now heaving with another fig's desires.



### *Ants*

We can usually sense the earthquakes slightly before the tectonic plates have devised a plan to push each other. But ever since the yellow animal appeared aboveground, we have lost that skill. It roars a lot more than any animal we have encountered, causing vibrations that sometimes collapse our walls and sometimes, makes the eggs hatch before their time. Our mandibles tire out from trying to paralyse it but it rages on in metallic stupor, unaffected.

Countless deaths.

There was one of our ancestors who managed to tire it out a couple of times. We pray to her every time the yellow animal appears near our settlement but none like her have been born in our lineage again.

We gently hold her name in our mandibles and carry on the task of protecting the one tasked with birthing another in her image.

Right before the fig tree is uprooted, we manage to migrate away to create another settlement. Start afresh.

If only the fig tree had listened to us instead of gloating. Maybe it could have travelled along with us.



### *New Wasp*

I am born in an emulsion of sap and warmth, and familiar scents.

My mother decays a few millimeters away. I gnaw at her remains.

I am already inseminated by one of my brothers.

Pollen deposits in my sac. I let it.

I claw out of the fig, following the path that my mother must have once dug, in the opposite direction. On the fuzzy surface of the fig, I inherit my mother's wings.

I am supposed to be on guard against any oncoming attacks but I smell no threats around.

The air is infertile.

I get carried along with a flush of dust and white polybags rushing in from one side, circulating in a small space.

Soon, panic.

Its scent, dense around the ground.

I wander around and am reminded of my mother's homing instincts for the fig tree. But I only find other wasps who emerged right before me. Their speech hindered on purpose. Or is it my inability to sense vibrations? Some of them are already indistinguishable from the soil. Others,

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I notice falling in swirls like the memory of falling leaves I've inherited from my mother, their tracking scent the pattern of a downward spiral.

My back burns. My wings tire out sooner than intended.

With no place to deposit the pollen or lay my eggs, I am free for a lifetime. I must be one of the lucky ones.

I swivel and dance aimlessly until all the warmth around me disappears. Finally, I rest my drunk-dizzy body on the cold steely skin of an animal that laughs every so often. I want to ask him, "What's the joke, buddy?" I'm afraid he will say that it is me.



### *Monkeys*

Monkey jump around on dusty terrace.

Palms burn. Chew on wire. *Oooa-oooa-oooa.*

Zapzapzap. Skin burned, roasted meat, smoke.

All other monkey cry together. Feast.

Monkey rattle antenna, smash glass bottle, spill green water, chew water hose.

Scream. Howl. Scream.

Monkey cry, memory of shade, memory of fruit.

Sweet fruit. No more.