



TLC SHOWCASE

GAYATHIRI KAMALAKANTHAN

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Introduction

I'm working on a poetry collection and I was lucky enough for one of my poems to win the Disabled Poets Prize 2024 run by Spread The Word and CRIptic Arts. This led me to a TLC 1:1 feedback session with Ahren Warner. Ahren's editorial eye was sharp and inquisitive. His questions about my intentions for the work gave the poems better direction. One poem had two different speakers with two different moral standpoints. We spoke about the potential (unwanted) leakage between the two voices and whether I could separate them via placement on the page. This kind of attention to detail and unassuming questioning from Ahren was pivotal in shaping the poem. He was interested in who I was writing after and for, who I was reading at the time and his feedback spoke those things. This was hugely important in setting the tone of our session. He also recommended some books/poets whose work specifically thinks about vulnerability on the page.

We talked about line length choices, about the power imbalance of rhetorical questions and how 'safe' I want a poem to feel. I still think back to this feedback because it was valuable beyond just the three poems we looked at. The insights were around my practice, positioning and desires as a writer.

Currently, grieving and queer home-making as creative acts are themes that dominate my thinking. As a child of refugees, I am interested in our ties or lack thereof to land, language and home. The collection I'm working on explores my relationship to parental figures, to both Tamil and English and to Sri Lanka. I'm trying to create new ways to obsess over the images and stories I want to write – there's always something about my mum and our methods of communication (language/technology/silence).

Due to my pain condition, when I'm not typing, I'm often lying down, stretching, walking and repeating words to myself or using my voice-to-text app. I've found that my work takes on the shape and feeling of this meditative process. It's important to me that I can still create and build something, even when I can't physically type.

Poetry Extract

Poem in which you consider the last time you talk to your mother

You wake up and think of her. Try not to check your phone till you've had a cup of tea. A bowl of cereal. You tell yourself that having a decent breakfast, having yourself a full stomach means you're more likely to pick up the phone, call her in good spirits.

You take a work call, go running, make a sandwich. You treat yourself – whole grain mustard with Seriously Mature Cheddar. You decide to do this more often. Splash out. Let yourself have it.

You think about calling her but send a message instead. *Busy at work today. How are you?* She replies immediately. *Phone when you can.* You call in the 15 minute gap you have between leaving your house and getting on the train for dinner with friends. *I have about 15 minutes.* She talks quickly. Tells you she might put the washing outside even though it's forecast to rain. She asks you if you've heard from the council. Reminds you *it's urgent.*

You think about how one day it's likely you won't have her to call. How it's both the most difficult and easy thing for you to spend time with her. How you hold your tongue too much and not enough. Why is talking so hard? Is it something to do with your ears? Maybe it's something about her voice. You know that one day, you won't have her to call.

Sometime later, you overhear a phone call on the bus. *Care is labour and labour is care.* And it makes it easier to call her this time. You finish your sandwich as she talks. You think you wish things were different somehow; that maybe you could say sorry and she could say thank you.

(First published by [Basket magazine](#))

Eating An Orange

I end the call and empty my schedule for the week. It takes 7 emails & the same voicenote sent to 3 group chats. You're not dead. Not yet. Which makes it harder. Harder to plan, harder to cancel, to travel, to eat. Let's say grief is an orange with an unending number of segments. How many segments do I have to eat before I get used to the taste?

A hospital room: indifferent, claggy, fitting.

When we wait together, I sit by your feet. You watch me with wide-open eyes. I have one hand in a book of poems and one hand in yours.

Clutching.

You do it well, this end bit of living. We share an orange in silence. The peel grafts itself new skin, the segments re-form. I've blocked out 1-8PM for this. There is something still majestic and very you about your grip. I sing a bhajan and wow, you smile. The nurse confirms it. Perhaps segmenting an orange isn't all bad.

In the family chat, I write *He definitely smiled*. Then delete it. My mother and sisters are having a night off. I imagine they are bathing or dozing or otherwise engaged in leisure, miraging themselves a single orangeless dinner.

(First published by [Spread The Word](#))

About the Writer

Gayathiri is a Tamil poet and performer. They're interested in how language shapes adolescence and how we might use it to queer the future.

Gayathiri won the Disabled Poets Prize 2024, the Faber & Andlyn Publisher's Prize 2022, and they were shortlisted for the Bridport Poetry Prize 2022. Their poetry appears in *The Margins* published by the Asian American Writers' Workshop, *bath magg*, *Bi+ Lines: An Anthology of Contemporary Bi+ Poetry* and *Magma* among others. Their debut novel-in-verse, *BAD QUEER*, is forthcoming with Faber. Gayathiri has performed with the Roundhouse, UK Black Pride, DAYTIMERS and BBC Contains Strong Language. They are currently a member of the Southbank New Poets Collective.



Gayathiri's forthcoming play, *PERIOD PARRRTY* (Kali Theatre), seeks to disrupt the gendered puberty ritual of the Samathiyaveedu (Tamil menstruation ceremony). *PERIOD PARRRTY* is a trans reimagining of a Tamil community building that invites audiences to join the very real party on stage.

Gayathiri received Developing Your Creative Practice for research on 'Decolonising the Creative Classroom' and now runs *WORD-BENDERS*, a poetry workshop centering trans and queer writers of colour supported by 14poems. They also produce *Queering Lit*, a workshop series on the business of writing for creatives of colour, supported by The Royal Society of Literature.

For more, find Gayathiri on Instagram: [@unembarrassable](https://www.instagram.com/unembarrassable) or go to [gayathiri.co.uk](https://www.gayathiri.co.uk).