English Teacher

Prabakar T. Rajan

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Graying hair gathered in a bun--
threadbare, ample-bosomed,
dewlapped and bespectacled--
hobbling the hot mile
of dust-rutted, gutter-ribboned streets
to our home each evening,
cracked feet clutching worn flipflops,
talcum powder staunching fluid flesh,
greedy rattle of coffee cup,
grunts between gulps,
moustached satiety.
On bicycled visits to her tiny house,
three bare rooms
and a picture of Jesus (brown
ringlets, sunset eyes,
barbed lamp for heart),
she'd sacrifice her day's ration
of two moldy biscuits for us,
my little cousin and me,
then kneel us down eyes closed
and quaver the lord's prayer in Tamil.
We made faces at her, giggling.

In the evening of life
people do what evenings do--
become invisible long
before they disappear. Weeks passed
before we noticed she wasn't coming--
would now never come
to afternoon tea.

What's left of any of us is phrases:
dusty lanes' flipflopped hobble,
soggy biscuit-crumbled palms,
cracked prayer-burbled lips
and a smell
like all the long afternoons of childhood.