

**Anitha Devi Pillai**

### **Home is a Three Syllable Word**

Torn and tattered migrant children  
raised on folklores from forefathers' land  
and local ones too when in schools.

Singapore —  
my paternal family's adopted land  
that they once abandoned  
when the British forces pulled out  
returning to their place of birth once again.  
The *Singapur wallahs*<sup>1</sup> spend years  
longing for kin left behind and chicken rice.  
Their hearts lie buried here.

Malaysia —  
Stage whispers of my maternal family  
never returning back  
mars all of our conversations.  
The fossilized Malaya Malayalees<sup>2</sup>  
grasp tightly to food and clothes  
and whenever possible the language too  
of their imagined Home.

Kerala —

God's own country where my ancestors lived in  
ancient grand *tharavads*<sup>3</sup>.

Their matrilineal ties bind  
families across the faraway oceans  
to unknown faces and accents.

Their practices that I do not comprehend  
I imbibe — no questions.

I seek refuge in the answers.

Often belonging just everywhere  
and sometimes really nowhere.

### Notes

1. An informal Indian English term to address a person who is “from Singapore”. Interestingly, many of those who returned to Kerala in the 1960s and 1970s were always referred to as “the man/woman from Singapore/Malaya” for the rest of their lives.

2. Malaya Malayalees are natives of Kerala who migrated to what was then known as Malaya (now, Malaysia) during the British colonial era.

3. *Tharavads* is a Malayalam word for ancestral homes in Kerala, India, where joint families lived under one roof especially amongst the Nair communities. The Nair community was traditionally a matrilineal society and their descendants often have names that include the name of their *tharavads*.