

# Snake Walk

by Ajay Vishwanathan

The Viper turns so quickly that Father's grabbing hand now faces its head instead of its tail.

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We are the Irulas. Scars from snake bites form a pearl necklace on Father's hand. At social gatherings, while Mother shows off her gold, Father flaunts his scars. He remembers every dot, the date and the snake.

He hunts snakes, the poisonous ones. He likes their poison; squeezed out and sold, it brings food to our plates.

I like it when he asks me to come along. On our snake walks.

"People here work in pairs," he tells me. I beam, my teenage head barely above his waist.

He looks at the soil, stares at a spot for a few minutes, and nods. "Do you see the faint scrape marks?" he asks. I don't, but say yes. He winks at me in response and hunkers down. With his bare foot, he sweeps aside a weedbush, exposing a shapeless hole. He dips his crowbar inside the hole and fills it with mud. Now, he feels for something he doesn't even see. The soil rises and falls. Within a few minutes, I watch him bring out a confused and angry snake. "King Cobra," he whispers. The snake swishes and hisses, expanding its muscular hood, eyes shiny like glazed marble.

Whatever he does, Father does with passion. Pressing its mouth open, its fangs glistening, Father brings the Cobra close to his face, locks gaze, and pecks at it between its nostrils. Like the way he pulls at Mother's locks and tilts her head back before kissing her.

These are better days. Father is famous. And sober.

Two years ago, he was a snakeskin seller who was asked to stop hunting snakes. He sat at home all day surrounded by his empty liquor bottles, hissing in anger, while Mother sulked, her skin tainted with Father's fury.

Till he was asked to go get them again, this time for their venom.

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NOTE:

This story has been truncated; it will be published in my forthcoming collection of short stories, ***From a Tilted Pail*** (Queen's Ferry Press; late Spring 2014) Do check the book out if you get a chance.

