



AIMEE
NEZHUKUMATATHIL

WORLD OF WONDERS

In Praise of Fireflies,
Whale Sharks and
Other Astonishments

'Beautiful, poetic
and powerful'
JAMES REBANKS

PEACOCK

Pavo cristatus

I'm eight and I've just returned from my first trip to southern India. During that time, I fell completely in love with peacocks—India's national bird—in spite of the strays in my grandparents' courtyard that shrieked every morning like cats being dragged over thumbtacks. Memories of those peacocks' turquoise and jade feathers and bright blue necks curl over my shoulder as I listen to my third-grade teacher announce an animal-drawing contest. My knees bounce at my desk. Of course I know what I'm going to draw.

We've just moved to suburban Phoenix from a small town in Iowa, where I was the only brown girl in my class. Although my new classmates stared hard at me when I was first introduced, I felt so happy to see kids of all shades in the room. I watch these classmates go off to the library to search for their animals, and ask my teacher if I can just stay and get started on my drawing. She fumbles in her purse and I see a pack of cigarettes. *No, you may not. We all need to be on the same page*, she says. In the library, I scan the shelves. There are no books on peacocks. My friends choose various dog breeds, small reptiles, kittens. In my notebook, I write in careful cursive, "Peacocks are the national bird of India." Then the bell rings and summons us back to class.

My teacher walks up and down the aisles, checking our work. When she stops at my desk, I smell and hear a smoky sigh, and her long maroon nail taps my notebook twice. I have no idea what this means. When it comes time to draw our animals on thick sheets of white construction paper, I begin with a sea of bright teal and purple. I outline the dramatic eye of the peacock in black, like he's wearing eyeliner. The rest of the page blooms with peacock feathers, dozens of violet eyes. I see the drawing the kid next to me is working on, a mostly blank page with a single squiggle on it: a snake.

My teacher continues to stalk through the rows of our desks. *Some of us misunderstood the assignment*, she says. She reaches the front of the room, and cleared her throat. *Some of us will have to start over and draw American animals. We live in Ah-mer-i-kah!* Now she looks right at me. My neck flushes. *Anyone who is finished can bring your drawing up to my desk and start your math worksheets.* Aimee—The class turns to look at me. *Looks like you need a do-over!*

I turn my drawing over and blink hard, trying not to let tears fall onto the page. Does she think peacocks can't live in this country? I saw peacocks at the San Diego Zoo the summer before, and my father once told me that roads are even blocked off for peacocks in Miami, where they can be seen strolling across lawns in the suburbs.

I pick up a new sheet of paper, slink back to my desk, and draw the most American thing I can think of: a bald eagle perched on a branch at the edge of a cliff, two eggs peeking up from its delicately balanced nest. I know the nest looks like a basket of Easter eggs, but I don't care anymore. I just want to be done so my classmates will stop staring. I color the wings with the saddest sepia crayon in my art supplies box. Before I turn the drawing in, I add an American flag—as big as the one hung outside our school—its pole poked into the tree's branches. Nothing about this drawing looks natural, especially since I drew the flag so much larger than the eagle's nest. Of course, I knew even then that eagle's nests are huge—about as wide and as tall as an elephant—but I didn't want her to ask me any more questions, so I just kept quiet.

When I get home that day, I park myself on the couch and stare at the television. When my dad calls me to dinner, I tell him I'm not hungry. When he walks into the living room to ask me to come to the dinner table anyway, I burst out, *Why do we need to have these peacocks all over the house? Wooden peacocks, brass peacocks, a peacock painting—it's so embarrassing!* My dad says nothing, just walks out of the room and gently calls back, *Your dinner will be cold.* But the next day, all the peacocks in the house are gone. All the peacocks, except for our family calendar: twelve months of peacocks—in front of a waterfall, a museum, a wall of bougainvillea; albino peacocks, peahens, and peachicks. That calendar remains, marking our time that year with its little squares and a new set of dramatic eyes looking back at me each month.

Weeks later, after announcements and the Pledge of Allegiance, my teacher declares the results of the drawing contest: my ridiculous, overly patriotic eagle drawing has won first place. It will be displayed in the giant glass trophy case right outside the principal's office. I will always hurry past it on my way to class.

I was a girl who loved to draw. I was a girl who loved color, who loved a fresh box of crayons, who always envied the girls with sixty-four colors but made do with my twenty-four off-brand shades. I was a girl who loved to draw—and yet, after that contest, I don't think I ever drew a bird again, not even a doodle, until well into adulthood.

This is the story of how I learned to ignore anything from India. The peacock feathers my grandfather had carefully collected for me the day before I left India grew dusty in the back of my closet instead of sitting in a vase on my white dresser. This is the story of how, for years, I pretended I hated the color blue. But what the peacock can do is remind you of a home you will run away from and run back to all your life: My favorite color is peacock blue. My favorite color is peacock blue. *My favorite color is peacock blue.*