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BOITAWL:
SOIL, LOST AND LEFT

by

BISHNUPRIYA CHOWDHURI
M.A., JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY, 2010

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term
2018

Major Professor: Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés

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ABSTRACT

Boitawl বৈতল (“Boi” - lack, devoid of, “Tawl” - bottom/ ground/ foundation), the word in one of the Bengali dialects refers to one without a ground beneath her feet. The thesis, a hybrid collection of prose and verse including narratives and graphic vignettes, flash, fabulist and short stories, prose poems and free verse imagines the inside worlds of such un-settled existences. In the process, the pieces connect migration, memory, childhood and lost towns with fractured humans caught in between – to reveal what lies under pillars of desires, the shapes of unsaid longings and recurrent images in their dreams.

DEDICATION

Abjinee Sufi

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Thank you, Cecilia for coming onboard to help shape what was just a handful of fragments to start with, for reading through the wobbly drafts, catching those loose ends and moving the boat forward. Without your affection, support and vision *Boitawl* could never have become. Thank you, Terry, for too many reasons, really – for unlocking the world of hybrid arts and writing, encouraging me to play with forms, helping with the paperwork hoopla when my grad-school plans got scrambled halfway. You are the best coordinator anyone ever could dream of! One special thanks also for connecting me to the Orange county kids, for the hugs that hold me together when it was a challenge to do it myself. And of course, for sharing Mike, the wisest bike of all. My sincere gratitude to Dr. Roney, Dr. Poissant, Dr. Neal, Prof. Uttich, Dr. Young and Dr. Flammia along with all the other wonderful faculty members of the Department of English and Creative writing at the University of Central Florida for bringing English a step closer to my foreign tongue.

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were longer than years. I know, you have stretched every inch of yourself to cover for me and I will choose you every time, a million times over!

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To my family in India and the circle of my girls – Jhulon, Tuli, Tora, Torsha and Anujata for embracing me with endless affection and hope through the hardest of times.

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“It is psychotic to draw a line between two places. It is psychotic to go. It is psychotic to look. Psychotic to live in a different country forever. Psychotic to lose something forever.”-**Bhanu Kapil**



H4

THE DEPENDENT VISA

It is easy to get. The easiest one after the Tourist Visa for old parents with pension and steady assets like a house, some roots, people. You will not need those. They will not ask for your return date, not ask about your assets, the color of your leaves, the kind of soil in which you are best grown. That way, it is the easiest visa you can get to step inside the mythical land of America. Your questions will be simple. Your answers, simpler still, unless, of course, you studied biology or instrumentation in college. If you have a background in science expect a closer look. The mythical land of America might take a bit longer to trust you with scientific skill set. What if you build robots or breed killer viruses at home when your partner (your sponsor, as they say) is out at work? You will be home most of the time, and they need to know you are not going to misuse your science skill set. But otherwise, it should be a breeze. Carry some pictures of the wedding and the invitation card along with the marriage-registration certificate to prove that all of that really happened, to prove that he is not faking to get a housemaid in America for his American wife and children. These kinds of things happen; everybody has heard the stories.

On the day of your interview, dress simple—white salwar kameez, marriage markers accentuated—vermillion, coral and conch bangles, sacred chain around your neck. The dress does not speak of you anymore. You look perfect for an easy visa interview. Do you look perfect for an easy visa interview? How do you look perfect for

an easy visa interview? You show up hours before at the consulate gate. Showing up ahead of time—look how neat my plans are, look how seriously I take this, look, look, look! And you wait. Every one of you has to wait. It does, does not matter how many hours early you arrived. “Madam, keep the line straight, please!” The guards at the gate are Indian—skin dense with melatonin (ensuring lower risk of skin cancer), eyes dark and tongue same as yours. However, they hold walkie-talkies, they speak English and mute sternness suffuses their faces, their clean, tucked, belted uniform, their reluctant lips and teeth behind. They look foreign. You wonder if this comes from some special American training. You try to keep the line straight, your vertebrae neatly stacked beneath your long braid, pleats of the kameez and your face even, your eyes cordial, fingers unthreatening, legs a little numb and you move when the line moves, like a doll. The queue grows at your back, shortens at front till you are the head of the worm awaiting entry to the land of dreams. The walkie-talkie blips and mutters, and he lets you in. You thank him as if thanking will add points to your suitability.

They scan your files (passport, certificates, marriage photos and invitation cards), they scan your body for possible threats—they find none. You may proceed inside. Inside the consulate it is clean, cool and somehow surreptitious. You are led into another room with gleaming glass windows, almost like a greenhouse. Greenhouses keep foreign plants alive and growing in otherwise hostile environment. Inside greenhouses you can grow hibiscus while in Michigan. You can grow cacti, jasmine, and oleanders. But this room is ice. Coming from the hot, humid Kolkata air, you freeze instantly. Chills run between your teeth that you have brushed twice today. Once in the morning, once before

leaving. Your husband told you how Americans can get pissed by the curry-smelling people. You do not want to piss off anyone today. You have quit your job, bought a ticket already. So you have doused yourself in *Marquis perfum*, gift from a relative working in the Middle-East. Mixed with sweat and traffic dirt, the fragrance loses sharpness fast and clings to your body like invisible fronds. In the cold fucking room people sit in circles and wait more. The lady at the desk flaunts an expensive shade of pink on her lips and her shirt is blinding clean and iron-creased. She looks like a girl above hapless public buses, sweltering asphalt and other pungencies of Kolkata world behind the grey walls. She fits her chair to perfection, like she was bred inside the consulate by the consulate for the consulate. But, you know that is just what she looks like, not what she is when she walks out of the building after work. Does she dream of America too? She sits the people in a pattern which only she knows how to build and then re-build. You check and recheck the documents in your folder. It is your fear, your habit, your thing to check stuff and you yawn and chill, chill and yawn for years. You yawn when you are nervous, you have chills when you are nervous or bored or both at the same time. You read the American posters framed on all the walls of the room. They feature smiling faces, the Statue of Liberty and the mountain with faces of men. They look mythical.

Standing in the queue for interview, you try to gauge the warmth of the pale faces on the other side of the glass walls of the counters. The room is stuffed with the anxious coil of people. But all of you are keeping your faces even, smiles humble and trying not to sweat too much. Everybody has brushed twice, you can tell. You try to hear the questions asked by the officers on the other side, you consider practicing the answers to

all the possible questions in your head—address of your husband’s apartment, the thing called a zip code, his telephone number, his skills and degrees, name of his employer . . .

You do well. You don’t fumble when they ask you simple questions. You return smile, you do not mix-up the apartment number with the zip code. You thank them twice when they give you the visa and wish you a “happy journey!”

You come out unhurt, victorious. You can now zip those suitcases and forget answers to the simple questions.



TO THE AIRPORT

To touch and let go
did you look
from the airplane window?
at the city sequined and soundless,
silvered on the head.

#

My mother and I we do not cry
in public,
She parts in the middle, sorts the knots inside my curl,
when it is time, she
combs me with her comb
for I have packed mine
(Otherwise she would never.)
makes me a pair of braids with her fingers
like in the school-days.

#

My mother and I,
we do not show the water
as it swells our hairs and hearts.
My mother and I
we are strong and sit in the car,
our muscles lax.
Or, that is how it seems as we laugh
at the same old joke cracked by the driver.
Her aachol creases by my jeans,
as if they will be back soon
on the same rack.

#

Forty-five minutes to the airport.
My mother and I
we do not cry in public.
Then, the bird flies high
air tugging at her beak
water in our veins
We do not cry, my mother and I
lilies of pain.

JET-LAG



Language was not a problem
for I am an English Major.

Time was.

Time, invisible,
without shape or color
or, a definite smell

woke me up at 3 a.m.

Eyes starchy and wide

like sun-dried laundry

opened at the stillness

of the carpet lying spread

after it ate the floor.

I touched my ears,

still abuzz in airplane song;

the tender curls, the quilt, unfamiliar ...

looking for sleep

that was nowhere to be found

like that missing half of

the terracotta earring.

THE KITCHEN

The cooking-range
is four whirlpools of wire.
No fire or mother
or, her kingdom of *Koutos* on the shelves.
Even though the dictionary says
Kouto is a "box" but
neat and rectangle,
boxes grace kitchens of the magazines.
Not where turmeric stains,
and oil separates round from the spices,
not where the fair gourd of her belly sneaks
from the folds of her saree
and her bun breaks for the fourth time
In the heat of that summer kitchen.

THE DEPENDENT WIFE

The dependent wife is not equal to a housewife. The dependent wife dreams of her office often. She checks her online bank account and then stops checking it. The dependent wife learns to cook. Just as mother said, there is hardly anything that cannot be perfected with practice. Roti is no different, marriage is no different, curries are no different ... try and wait and she will see. Her fingers will learn the right softness of the dough. Her hands will muster the right hold on the roller. Her rotis will spread—round, moon like, skin like. They will swell over the red hot coil, filled with breakfast memories till it bursts with a delicious burn and life will be perfect on the table. The dependent wife walks on the carpet, she looks at blank walls and makes long calls. The family on the other side of the computer window is eager for a virtual tour. She shows them the sycamore in the front yard, the carpets on the floor, the cooking-range, she notes down more recipes from the mother. She has ramen for lunch, loads them with pepper and Sriracha till her face is on fire. She eats with Netflix. She goes to the craft store. She opens a Pinterest account, then a Twitter, a Tumblr, then an Instagram. She is no longer sure what to do with these after she opens them. She walks from the blank walls towards the blank walls. A print of Rivera's flower girl, salvaged from the dumpster adjacent, finds her way up on one of the walls. Her face immersed among monstrous stalks of calla lilies, she smells of water and

leaf and never turns her face. Netflix stays on. She marvels at the storylines, their scripts so very different from the dramas in India. She stares and stares at the white characters chasing, loving, and screaming solving crimes and lives. She begins to get their jokes. She picks up the rise and fall of their Zs and Os. One day she gets the stack down from the dresser, drapes a saree, kohls her eyes and gets rid of the mane she grew for wedding. Age drops by a few years. She feels almost boyish. The dependent wife showers fast, as if she has to be on time. She gets ready fast, just to feel the rush of it. As if she needed to catch the bus and be off to work. Her dreams blend America with the old home. She remembers and writes the fragments down trying to understand if they were synecdochic or metonymic. She never can. The dependent wife posts many pictures on her Facebook. Compliments flood the neat execution of recipes. She paces some more from living room to the bedroom because ten thousand steps a day can make your heart healthy.

She lists and sprays deodorant between the folds of bath towels.

When the summer happens, she steps out under the American sky which is the color of the irises of the people here. It is also the color of her childhood water. It is also the color of her husband's favorite shirt. She walks in the yard. Stands under the sun on the ground still damp from the melted winter. Her feet sink into the grassy vapor rising from the ground. Sunshine, thousands of sharpened shards of cosmic heat and mythical light rays, pins and burns her skin. She shuts her eyes to listen to their song on her skin.

SUPERMARKET

On that first trip to supermarket,
they floated about
among orchid lips murmuring the orchid tongue.

Multiplied dollars are too many rupees

She walked away from the cherry tomatoes

to the strawberries

almost slipping on the mud-less floor.

Breast pieces and leg quarters in the showcase

say, they were born that way

Not a bird, no wings,

or, longing of any kind

without death.



THE MIRROR

A lot of time she spends in front of the bust-length mirror in the bathroom. They don't have another in the graduate student housing. Under five blazing bulbs the girl inside glows yellow and looks certainly prettier. She looks as if Baba and Maa fed her a lot of turmeric so to set her skin on fire like the Goddess. Well, at least the half of her. The other half of the mirror girl has gone missing. At first, it does not seem to bother her much. She returns every smile and searches for a zit or a crow's feet with a distance that is almost gentle.

A busy 34th Street across the housing sounds like a waterfall. She wakes up dreaming of a legless shalik. The bird hobbled on its belly across the carpet of the apartment. Such sharp details make dreams linger.

"Don't worry" the girl on the other side says "You can see any number of bizarre in your dreams—"

"But don't you see it is really missing?" She pressed on.

"It's not missing; I have seen it at the shopping mall last week."

"Are you sure?"

"What kind of a silly question is that?"

For a day or two they look and do not look at each other. Mirror plus and minus the mirror girl wanders around the university campus looking for missing bird-parts. Neat brick buildings, neat brick people, neat brick cars and runners in shorts are abundant. They swish by, stand stiff, she walks as if right through them like a spirit being.

Under five blazing bulbs she tries one two three shades of lipsticks, then one two three shades of other shimmers on her nose, cheeks and forehead. The mirror girl looks like a distressed queen. She pouts and makes bits and pieces of other magazine faces. She reads the names of each shade—*Brave Girl, Naughty Pink, Love Me More*. Kitchen tissues wipe the queen clean with coconut oil. Five blazing bulbs flood the windowless bathroom with light. On some mornings she sneaks beside the husband when he shaves. They pose—resting her head on his chest, their hands connect in a perfect circular curve like in a dance, they flash washed and ironed smiles and the couple on the other side look forever happy up to their bust. Then he leaves for his lab. They place all their dreams at the end of his thesis. She watches his thin frame disappear into the turn.

She always felt a sisterly sort of tug with this girl whose face she knew was hers in reality but the contours—zits, moles and angles—kept slipping out of the memory if she did not go to see her every now and then in the bathroom. Like those fishes that need air to survive she needed to look into the mirror to hold on to the details—the flicker in the pair of irises, the crescent underneath and the embarrassing contrast of upper-lip hair on her wheat-skin.

“What if it has turned into a fish tail like a mermaid and gone off to the sea?” The mirror face wonders. The girl, knowing the science and history and other facts that completely debunk such possibility, does not deny.

“You never know,” she replies instead and looks away. The nail polish on her feet grows three-months old.

At the beginning of the fall semester, Walmart, the great, puts long mirrors all the way from China on sale for the newcomer students. Five dollars apiece. Everybody knows broken mirrors bring bad luck. Living without insurance on stipend money, bad-luck is unaffordable. They ask the cashier lady to put an extra wrapping on the glass. One of his friends gives a ride home from the market that day. Sitting in the car, she prepares a winning smile for the mirror girl. She can almost see the surprise and joy when she gets all of her body back! They put it in the bedroom on top of a packing box by the window where it gets natural light. They also move the floor lamp right beside for the times when the natural light will be out. She arranges all the three lipsticks and the wedding perfume and the little jars and bottles of shimmer and polish on the remaining space in front of the box. The set-up wobbles a bit from pacing but otherwise it reminds her of her mother's dressing-table. She waits for the next day till she is by herself.

She scissors through the middle of wrapping. The papers fall to the sides like an unpinned saree.

The mirror girl looks kind of sad finding out that the other half was still human and was wearing a nail polish that was already four-months old.

BAROMASYA

PINKY

Whenever they meet in the stairs or at the entrance of the building, she greets and speaks. Whenever she speaks her mouth keeps forming loose unkempt smiles. Her large fruity eyes float on the pretty face, swaying every now and then by what seems like distant waves of what one cannot be certain—a sadness, some irrational glee.

She loves when the chilly wind blows for it smells of the mountains of Sikkim. She hates it when the chilly wind blows for it smells of the backyard garden, the bougainvillea and drying laundry on the string. She looks closely into the clouds, waits for the curtain to blow like it did back home to reveal the Himalayas—Kanchenjunga's ice glowing golden and pink with the sunshine.

ANU

"Keep her out of diaper." Said Anu's mother on video chat.

"Kutty, do you know where to go?" Mother points to the plastic potty. She takes the diaper off the damp little ass and feels a little lost.

“Haan! Haan!” The child nods in agreement. Her eyes dart off to the pink piggy on the screen. She gets the dinosaur out, she gets all her balls out, she throws the doll away, she wants to get inside the box itself.

“Kutty mamma! Play on the carpet.” The mother instructs and gets her out of the box.

“Mamma, if you need to poopoo, I will be right here to help. Okay?”

“I want to watch the TV,” she says.

The mother opens the fridge door. “Kutti, remember to go in the potty.” Kutti gives her dinosaur a shower. The mother dices the potatoes. Listening to the pink piggy sing the English alphabets. “Kutti, do you feel like going, now?”

“Noo no nonooo,” she answers.

Mother chops the onions, her eyes water. Kutty feeds the dino, bananas.

“Eat now, don’t you fuss,” she says.

Mother fires the stove, mother keeps an eye on the spices spluttering in the oil. Mother Listens to the English alphabets march into the girl. “Mummy duck says, quack quack quack quack,” Kutty sings, nanof da daks came wack wack wack.”

Kutty needs to go. Kutty lets it go.

HOW THE DREAM WORKS

Reality always has a manifest and a latent content. By utilizing the technique of 'free association', you start with one story and then follow where it goes. To further help interpret the cryptic images of our reality, one can delve into the processes:

DISPLACEMENT

Occurs when the desire for one thing or person is symbolized by something or someone else.

Her head purred, a longing rose so intense that it shook her out of afternoon siesta. She stepped out of the bed startled by the intensity and wobbled her way across the hallway unsure of the nature of this desire. The kitchen stood still between the gurgling dishwasher and shelves, its breath, fermented with past cookings. These days hunger was most potent of all senses and came onto her frequently, ferociously. She opened the refrigerator. The child somersaulted in her womb which she had imagined to be similar to the pictures Hubble delivered. The almost-human afloat in the warmth of distant galaxies. Each lit perforation, a universe—home and mother. Hunger gnawed and she pulled the pack of burgers out from the freezer. The light hadn't changed since morning. Winter days were such—one unanimous hue of blue foisting the hours on top of each other till everything had gone opaque and there was no need to keep the blinds open. Those adolescent winters spread like quilts on the terrace under mellow sunshine. Dried mulberries rolled on simmering heat with jaggary, chilies and five spices. She

turned on the oven and chased the marigold effulgence of an unreal winter some more. She looked for mother, aware too of the impossibility of finding her in real. Ice burnt fast from the patty on the skillet. She took the butter out. She wanted to put a dollop of it on steamed rice and mash it with salt and egg and make balls of it before eating. Those rice balls she will feed her almost-human. Those rice balls that were once born between the short, fair fingers of her mother faraway had made their way into her saliva and blood for years, were as if longing to come out for the almost human wearing red ballerinas in one dream, standing on the terrace garden of oranges in another. Little girl learned the art of peeling oranges from her Baba. He skinned the fruit like he was blooming a bud. Standing in the American kitchen, the pregnant mother craved some flowers—to chew on the crisp petals of pumpkin flowers and Sajina.

Outside, a cloud broke, started snowing.

SYMBOLIZATION

This is characterized when the dreamer's repressed urges or suppressed desires are acted out metaphorically.

Naru and Lily plan the weekends ahead. So does his Junior Raktim and team leader Mr. Ghosh. Mr. Ghosh wears the white shirt every Friday and meets his group on conference call at 11 a.m. sharp. Naru, whose official name is Tathagata, goes green promptly in the morning to address all concerns of the clients.

Lily missed a first division in Higher Secondary Examination by ten points—two simple calculus problems (five points each), or, the farming conditions and

distribution of paddy fields in India (ten point), she thinks, may have cost her those ten points.

In Naperville, Chicago, Fridays are swift, mostly. Mr. Ghosh sorts the instructions, passes them on to Naru. Naru works from home, in his bermudas. Lily boils daal and dices pumpkin and potato for a mix-veg curry.

Raktim is thrown up hard from a porn-ish dream. Raktim keeps the laptop by his side and his smartphone too. He plays soothing beta waves on YouTube to fall asleep. Often he does and the headphone wraps around his neck dangerously. He joins the conference call (his hardness limps naturally) and apologizes for the delay before he brushes his teeth. Naru and Mr. Ghosh hurtles instructions down the stairs on subordinates and sub-subordinates. Their total figure is reduced to a dot in the end. They land onto Raktim's head and other heads in the team like coins in an empty can. Jiggles fill up the office in the cloud, the office on the earth. They get to work on their dining tables without brushing their teeth. In the odorless cavity of the computer screen, they speak letters and signs that braid into each other and codes follow. Raktim and Naru keep their eyes fixed on the ant-march from inside chat boxes.

Outside, in her Naperville Apartment 365 on Willow Brook Drive, Lily scales the fish, vacuums the carpet and shampoos her hair. Her twin sister, Beli, reads her funniest jokes on video chat from Kolkata. On video chat, she shows her the new shopping mall of the city, they window shop together. Lily's face sways inside the glowing rectangle of Galaxy S-4 like a beta in a tank. She is shown the innards of

chicken-egg roll, sequined threadwork on overpriced dresses, Beli's newly pedicured feet. Lily comments and compliments, her mouth waters for a chicken egg roll. They do not share looks but has the same voice. When on speaker, their conversation turns into a monologue. Naru, Raktim and Mr. Ghosh have the same green lights beside their names in the chat list from eight a.m. to five p.m.

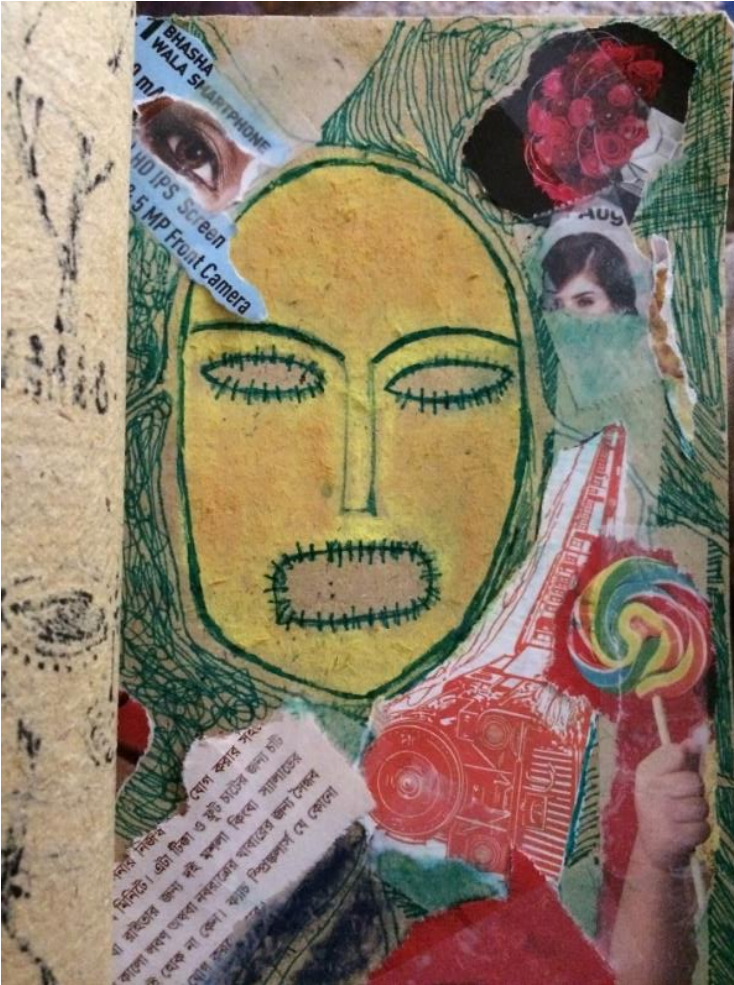
Naru and Lily wake up before the alarm on Saturdays. Lily opens her personal laptop like a pro and Beli knows she won't be calling today. On Saturday morning, Mr. Ghosh sleeps late until its time and Raktim goes for a run. On Saturday mornings, all six hundred and fifty muscles in each of their bodies giddy up! Lily's head sparkles like a Clorox-cleaned floor. She carefully reads the specifications of the new ammunitions on game shelf. Mr. Ghosh's favorite is AK-47. They finish their tea in sharp swigs, they flush the toilet and join the field. Operation "Fire Sahara". Version 7.0.

"Be careful! I know they are close," Lily warns Naru.

He holds the gun ready. Raktim fills his bag with grenades, shoots the enemy figures down. They drop and disappear from the desert. Oh, so real—the blast and the flashes. Mr. Das hides behind a sand dune, waiting for instructions. Naru and Lily run. Sweet homeopathic globules of excitement are loose in their veins. The game goes on.

DIALOGUE

The world out there is getting darker, some say. Some believe in hope. In the



foreign land, we keep the circle close.

He and I—sometimes yellow after sex, we talk about the neighboring block. The houses on lush lawns, seasonal wreaths on their doors, and windows that give away parts of curtains, slices of the living rooms, frames of vacations, bits of porcelain angels and also love-birds. We pick and choose from the collection and dress

the one of our dreams, the one in the air, the one right there, untouchable rooms and fancy headboards.

Red, green, blue peppers of hunger.



As long as the ice holds—we remember and forget
the tribe back home, we want and do not want to
turn, we cook soybean-curry and keep the circle
close.

The white, long strips do not move much.

Blind is a funny name for window curtains.

Lying in the bed, sleepless and without
glasses, I watch their geometry grow
luminous.



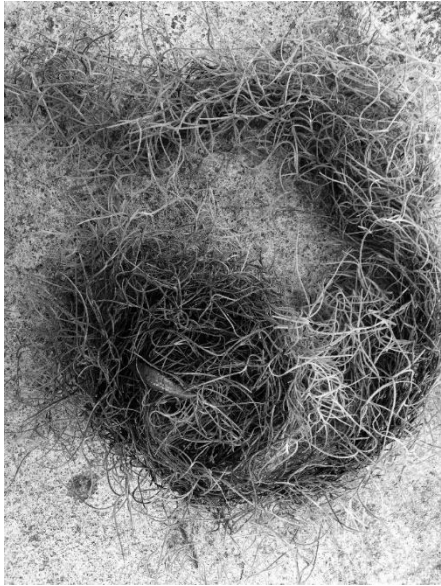
All my sarees cluster unused.

All my bangles in another
pocket.

All my blouses and bindis;
all my friends on another
planet.



He suffers from aimless empathy. When we pass a man with “Homeless”



pendant on his chest on our way to ‘Trader Joe’s’ he buys breads, and bananas, cookies and returns for the person. My husband cries sometimes. Meanwhile, I stuff our daughter in the cart. I let Disney tame her. I pick the greenest cucumbers and avocados on sale. Soon I have all twenty things and more.

What is their fault, those people at the airport, in the airplane? He gets blue and cloudy from the news.

It’s not in our control—

So should I go dance and eat as if everything is alright?

Well ...no point cribbing maybe

you should go serve in an orphanage or something—

will that solve it?

We go on in whispers, let the argument sprawl, like wool from a sweater undone and the tangle covers the baby snoring at my belly. Then, sour and lost, we hang up.

Baby cries out “naaa ...”

“Ei to ami”—I mumble in her ears, wrapping myself around her. Our breathing evens.



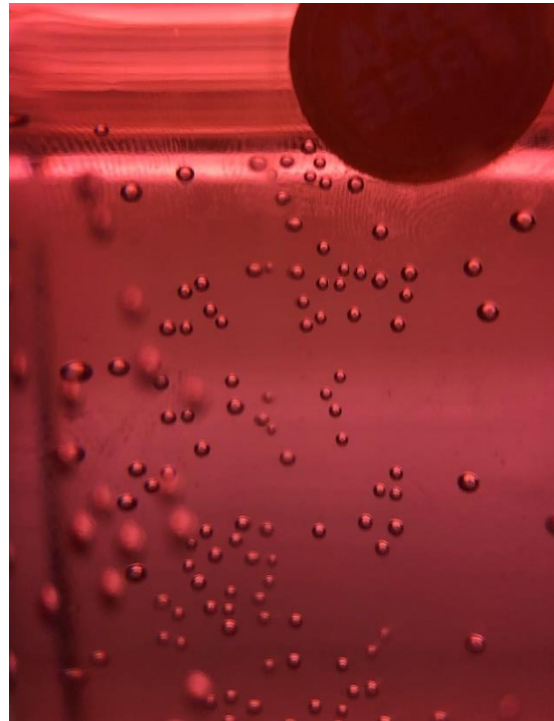
In the foreign land, we keep the circle close.

A WINTER'S BOOK OF FABLES

I

Many of us will only learn to swim upward, longing for air in an endless water.
Many of us will plant flowers on our roofs, every winter till our bodies give up.
Many of us could not help but wonder at factory skeletons lying midfield from the train. For many of us aeroplanes will just be a flying star.

For many of us, we will be food for the birds. Eaten and excreted on faraway soils, faraway houses, and faraway phones we shall be. Faraway houses will have emptying floors, in faraway basements we will keep our boxes, many gigabytes of spaces in our faraway phones we will saturate with pictures of food, noise and longings unidentified.



Spaces will hold our breaths busy and song asleep. Spaces carpeted with faces and sheets of snow.

Many of us will swim upward, only in an endless glass of water.

II



The aquarium hangs odd like an ocean afloat at one corner and makes the house nervous every day. The house focussed on her fancy pink paint, blue roofing, was a little protective of the frills on her windowpanes and singsongy door-bell and ignored the carpet reeking of stale cereal and bits of cookies, stiffened rice and baby-piss. Humans who surround her like space clouds and distant stars were tricky things—you never knew how they would behave.

She prayed for a safe dumb distance.

III

Look closely and you will see the hole that runs through her. It runs along her coherent sentences, underneath flash sales and organic meats, sprinkling chill over cruelty-free carrots. Look closely and you will see during the winter nights too many

empty carts freeze at the parking lot. The market never sleeps, at least they will make you believe so as they keep all the lights on all nights all days.

“Try to sleep,” says the bean-can to the other.

“I am full of bad beans, they give me nightmares,” replies the other.

“Its not in our control ...the things inside us, you know ...”

“ I guess ...”

“Okay.”

“Last week, I was left with the canned pineapples that looked as stupid as us. They will gut you the same ...pineapple or beans.”

“...”



IV



Winter arrives in October and stays till March. Meanwhile, keep walking every day on the treadmill to save the bones from crumbling.

RAAHI: TRAVELOGUES

SEA WORLD

The Entrance

Theme parks are full of people

Theme parks are fun.

Let me check your bags,

if you're carrying a gun.

Resemblance

Maa,

I cannot remember what we wore when we first visited Nicco Park. I have been trying to since last week we went to Disney Sea World. You cannot even imagine how big it is. At least ten or may be more Nicco Parks could fit in one Sea World! And the day was blue and bright. Not like that day we visited Nicco Park. I still remember the sad drizzle and the wad of dark from the big fight you and Baba had the night before, sticking to us as we rode the train to Howrah and then a taxi (or, did we take the bus?) to the biggest fun

place of our world back then. I wished for the sun and I wished you would smile and the best part was when you did as the roller coaster swished through the sky and water the next second.

You won't believe how they teach the killer whales and dolphins to dance and jump and do all kinds of tricks! As if looking at sea creatures as big as that move inside aquariums as big as those was not crazy enough! I wish you were there. You would have clicked a hundred photos!

But do you remember what we wore that day we visited Nicco Park and if you can recall, tell me the year as well. Would you, please? I

have been trying to remember since last week.

Yours,

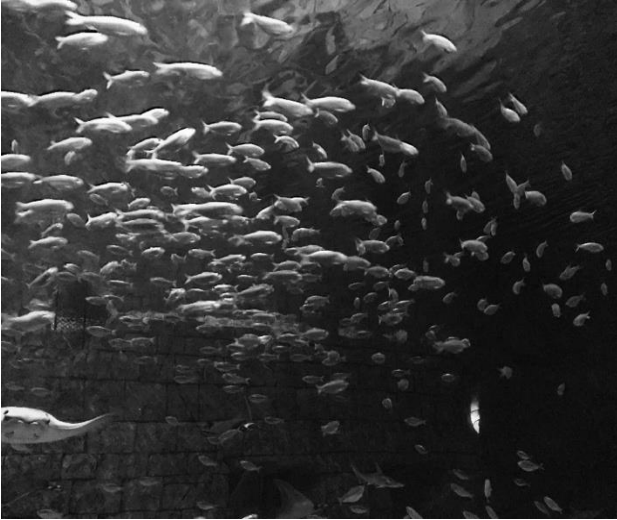


A Poem about the Seahorse

I name you Love.
Complicated, underwater.
You used to be a tree or is it the other
way round?



Shoal



On either of the glass wall

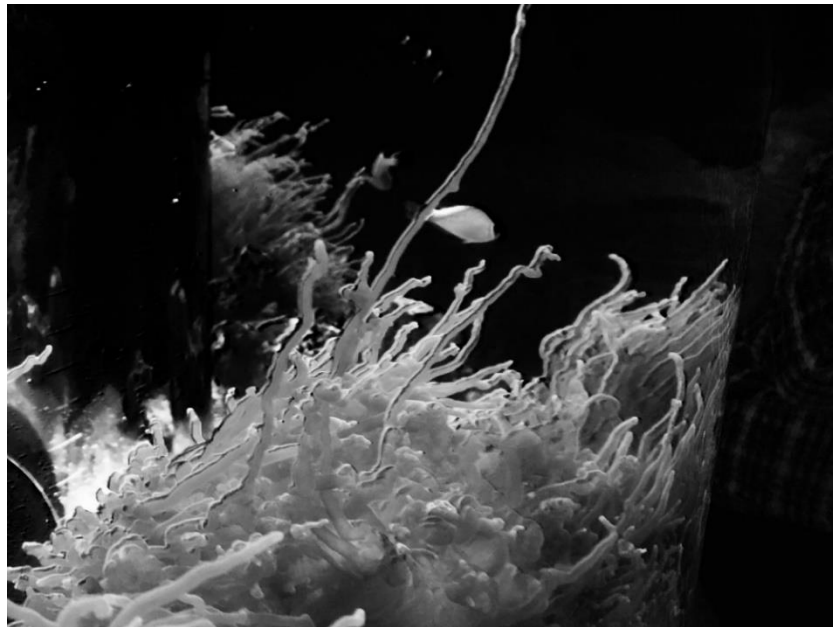
In the darkness, we move

Visitors, skins, fins

“It has been a pleasure to meet you!”

Just so you know,

Our memory lasts three seconds.



We were blinded by the pizza smell and ice-cream puddled in our veins

Have You Seen Me?

I was lost in the year 1991.
You don't believe in witches, do you?



House under Water



There is nothing wrong, nothing to dread.

Just take a deep breath

and let it spread.

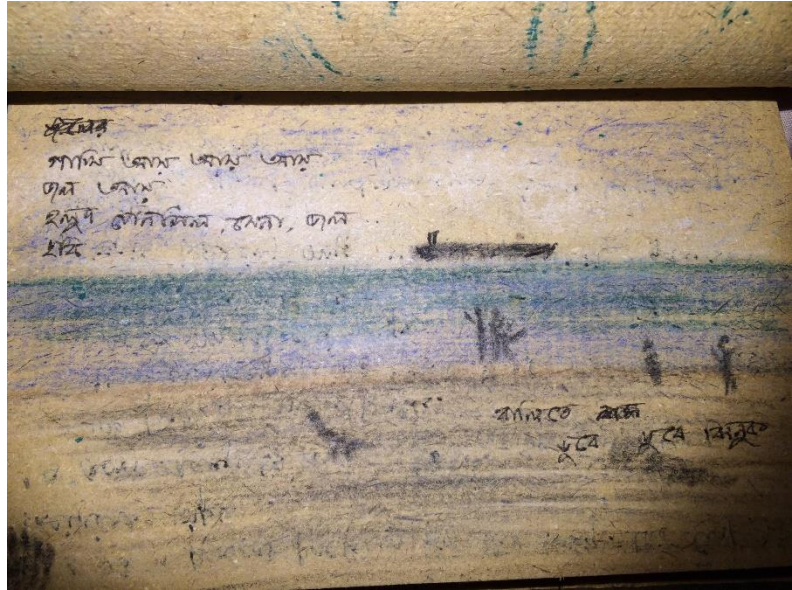
It's not real, this brick, the trees —

We know only a fraction

of all our seas.

AT THE PIER

Before we leave, we must
plan for the baby—food,
diapers, sweater, water,
pacifier, and cap in case it
got cold, spoon, wipes, toys.
I slip my notebook and
pencils at the back in case of
a poem.



The waves return with salts from all those other shores from last century with us, aging
eight, nine, and ten. When the little girls met the ocean for the first time in their life,
endless whooshing drowned their moffusil hearts with thrill and fear; they clung to
their mother and aunt. Their sarees flapped in the wild sea-wind as they walked into



the sands of Marina beach,
Chennai. Probably all oceans
were really one.

Rising up and down . . .

Towns broke into girls

Rivers took them in

And healed the sharp edges.



I wonder, if it is the same with everybody who is thirty-one and lives in a different language than the one they were born into? Do they confuse alphabets with oysters and weeds of unknown origin? I looked at the gulls and one of them stared back. Into my

waters and into my doors. Then, it left. I photographed a footprint.

Our lips step into each other

We taste, taste taste the seawater ...



You know the feeling when the waves draw
back from under your feet. The feeling
when his car pulled away from the
driveway

And you do not know how to move
The sand slips fast
And you do not know how to move.



“Never forget that writing is as close as we get to keeping a hold on the thousand and one things — childhood, certainties, cities, doubts, dreams, instants, phrases, parents, loves — that go on slipping, like sand, through our fingers.”

— **Salman Rushdie**

STATIC

If you are like me, you have left the town at night, you have left thirsty to your quivering lips for the new and happy to finally sever this cord that tied you for so awful long to this soil. But soil it is not—never that pristine. Your town pit aged bricks and sat haunted by the ever mounting debris of outdated telephones and clichéd metaphors of women, bosoms and cries. No, it was nothing like soil, nothing like the womb ... But just another settlement pickled and splattered by the mythical river. Those grocery stores have always made you curious and a little dizzy as you huddled near the counter behind other taller customers staring at the psychedelic streamers of sachet-Maggi-noodles and shampoos and tomato ketchup dangling in the air from some invisible ceiling. Your mother would not have you buy many noodles so your mouth watered looking at them as you imagined the taste in one of friend's lunch box. When your turn was up, your list of needs parroted "Chini—araisho gram, dim paachta and ...and ...half pound pauruti". The men inside the store waltz for centuries among sacks of Baanshkati rice and Sonamug grains, rows of pale green Keokarpin hair-oil and sunlight detergent, candle sticks and eggs scooping, counting, blowing into the crisp folds of paper bags ... In all your life spent in the town, none of them ever aged a wrinkle. The woman with sachet-curls and noodle dreams, who lived atop the grocery stores, sprinkled magic on them, you knew.

You filled the discarded paper-bags with yellow breath and shut its mouth tight.
You tiptoed up the stairs, behind where your grandpa dozed off over the newspaper.
Quivering with laughter already you smashed the paper balloon—Pow!

If you are like me, if you left with suitcases full of only the nicest clothes and books of outdated poetry and no paper bags and no south summer winds, if you thought “this was it”, this was how you untie yourself from the walls and bicycles and the old English teacher—his face bobbing up and down the shades of darkness, this was how you forget your father’s reading glasses on the table, the asthmatic breath of your grandmother and all those viridian paint on the doors, you have hardly left.

If you are like me, if you walked on from the gullies into the highway, from there to the sharp concrete of the airport, from the port into the gut of that big blind bird as it took you higher and down you watched the town curl like a bug before milk flooded the sky drowning all else. You watched the horizon, and felt it was the way to leave, to shed the old skin, painted pretty and strange so many times for the stage performances to act and dance to the tunes you thought could never stick to you (you have always been so poor in remembering songs), you thought it was okay to leave those friends and the awkward boy who whispered desperately how much he liked you, you thought you will turn the bike away from the nameless-corners, tear through the cricket cries and mosquitos into the numbness and words will lose you, unsorted conversations will lose you and dead tone will prevail at peace you have not left long enough.

If you are like me, even after you have crossed one world to enter another, even if your hair is shorter than it has ever been, even if your lips and eyes match the color of

your jeans and frocks every now and then and your tongues tut-tut-tut to the 'other' language, you will have visitors. But the doors will not open to serenities of gardens, but will have the old English teacher, his fingers cold and permanent around the red book of English grammar show up right at 6 o'clock. "Define adverbial," he'll go on, "Spell nightingale" till your spine fluttered. The graphite will grow blunt going over N-I-G-H-T-I-N-G-A-L-E and the master will disappear. If you are like me, you'll hum school prayer songs and in those dreams you will forever be twelve and you will forever be thirteen. Dark country maps, those menstrual songs will emerge on your blue school skirt, startling, unnerving, full of choking sensations.

If you are like me, they will, they will catch up and greet you "Merry Christmas!" The debris from that rejected town, debris from space, debris stardust and men—their faces aglow—girls and boys, the men and women like fireflies and pickle jars and of course the winged river shot through the evening. If you are like me, chatter will flow from above the trees, psychedelic streamers, the cackles after the poorest jokes will rise from beneath the ground, callouses—benign brass bells will jingle in your blood and there inside the window will be your face, painted thick and strange for the annual dance performance, school performance, recitals and weddings.

If you are like me, they will, oh they will fill you slow, as far as you go ...

OLD TOWN SERPANTS

Like fossils of prehistoric serpents, these long houses lie.

You cannot tell if they are dead or asleep—

These people in our town,

gnarl brick by brick, water drip on wall-skins—blue hues and

dentures,

loose in the plastic box by the bed.

You cannot tell if they are asleep or dead.

Ghostly muslin, broken grains and diesel burnt

Jump off the wheat mill, over the lungs and other machines,

unnamed in her body.

We hear the Bollywood numbers stir those gullies of giggling pubescents.

Our song-bird whispers, whispers in the half-eaten fish-heads, goat-heads unsold—

“bina payal ke hi baaje ghunghroo ...”

Can you feel her ticklish lips? The pressure-cooker whistles high, its belly full of Sunday
mutton curry.



TOPO-SHEET

People walk secretly dazed in this thickness. Their eyes and ears look alert (except for the droopy wrinkles and loose skin one can only occasionally see in the bathroom mirror). Their hands and feet perch firmly on the handles and pedals and they appreciate good chow mein and biriyani every once in a while.



Their tongues lick those television-screens, flat and foreign against the other walls of their rooms. They follow for entire evenings the talent shows and operas of well-dressed lives, of troubled human beings.

In the complex cartography of their intestine a small yellow pill of sleep remains undigested.

You cannot really tell if they are dead or asleep.

Like an over-grown overripe grapefruit, stale rice—lots of stale rice, bones licked and their chocolatey marrow sucked clean (the bone is a flute for the leftover soul of a

beast or a bird and a hungry tongue), imperishable plates from ceremonies of all kinds burst over the vat and spill. Odorous dahlias bloom and sway, they heavy the air here and there.

Drains blues with murk it takes a day's downpour to turn alleys into creeks, unloved and thin. Filth float about like stray cats and fishes everywhere. These long houses—their serpentine bellies soak in the flood water, gurgling songs only deaf can hear.

If you look at their darkish length, their yellow eyes through the water, you will see the soft quivers, the heaving of a strange dyno creature ... you will see those chalky blue ceilings inside their cavity ribbed with years of life lived and left.

Dogs of the town have heard the stories from their mother's mother. Stories of the pale and blue humans who conjured the serpent houses long, long time ago. The river was then alive, curls of her saffron hair carried them on huge ships to the banks of this town and that. Their turquoise irises twinkled like strange magic blossoms as they built rooms and stairways and patios and sometimes pale fingers curled around black coiffures, thick walls hid the butterflies and such secrets were locked between windows and wall shelves and backdoors of all kinds.

You cannot really tell if they are dead or asleep.
Centuries have passed, families cut and sewn back together and still--
The spell works. Blue-eyed babies appear now and then from inside brown wombs.
And laughs are heard collapsing another wall somewhere in those

Houses of our town.

INITIATION

I noticed the man when he appeared in the office-time chaos of Howrah station, the way your sixth sense notices stuff that other senses miss. That is to say I saw him and did not see him at the same time as he walked straight at me like a shadow, like a rod in buttoned shirt and ragged pair of trousers and threw his tentacles at my breast and squeezed all the air out of me in a flash and walked away. It froze me amidst the thickness of the subway tunnel, amidst the rush of people headed to and running from the city. I stood sight and soundless, a punctured doll dazed altogether by the square piece of daylight affixed at the end of the stairway exit higher up. Then I got my pieces back. Everything worked again, fine.

In the following days and years I will always wear my backpack like a shield across my chest; I will see other girls doing the same as we elbow out of the ladies-only compartments into the breathless station world. In the next forever of my existence, I will remember the incident as the first trigger warning offered by the city Kolkata. Even though it was not the first time my body was grabbed by stranger hands. Even though it was not my first time walking in a subway.

SCIENCE-CITY TECHNOLOGY PARK

Our town was not very far from Kolkata, but our connection to the city remained thin past my teen years. It remained a place of events (Book fair, weddings) and the quaint stuffs (The National Museum where they have a real Egyptian mummy in a glass coffin and a blue whale's jaw) and relatives (the ones who always wore prettier clothes). We, the children, were hardly taken to Kolkata unless for a specific reason. After they made "Science City", the state's first theme park in Kolkata, almost all decent schools of the surrounding suburban towns took their children at least once every two years for a day trip at the "Science City Technology Park". The students had to bring a consent letter from the guardian and a subscription of seventy to one hundred rupees to be allowed on the trip. Kolkata, for those few years of watching *Jurassic Park*, became synonymous to the film, to that distant place with dinosaurs that opened and closed their super mouths, nodded and lashed their tarpaulin tails and made otherworldly screams. Kolkata with all its wide streets and tall architectures and smell of the unmanaged garbage mountains became synonymous to the delirious chills of traveling into the make-believe prehistoric land of foreign dangers and adventures. The students were to keep in line, hold hands while touring the park, its well-groomed flower beds and technological exhibits. However, nothing except those dinosaurs in the city they were placed into had much meaning for us.

BIG BAZAAR

They did an extensive promotion for the prepping of the middle class of Bengal for the first ever super market “Big Bazaar”. They said things cannot be better or cheaper than available at Big Bazaar. Their claim was accompanied by photos of fresh Hilsa fish to wedding garments to home-décor. We read and re-read the advertisement that told of a place for ALL things BEST and CHEAPEST. We read how people of Kolkata and from other faraway towns (who boarded 4 a.m. locals to reach the venue before the shop opened) — “crazies” (as my mother would describe them) — congregated and queued up in mile-long lines in front of the mall on the first week of its opening and for many days after that. That year, more than a few friends went to Kolkata for shopping for the festival. In the following decade, many malls will rise like an empire over the city and spread slowly like a living organism. Houses will fill up with “BEST AND CHEAPEST THINGS” and I will move out of my home town to live in Kolkata.

THE PAYING GUEST

Being the first one of that year to rent a place at his establishment, the owner of the house-hostel offered that I choose the bed of my liking. The room had provision for four inmates all of whom got one chouki (a slender version of a twin bed), one bedside tabletop storage and one of the four shelves in the wall cabinet. The kitchen space was only for keeping the utensils (which had to include a pair of stainless still multi-cup tiffin-carriers and absolutely no oven or cook-top. The tiffin carriers were to be given to

the home-service food provider and there were two bathrooms. Like cooking, bringing *Male* and female friends over in the room was strictly prohibited. I agreed instantly for it was still the largest slice of freedom from home and the place was a walking distance to the university. I chose the bed by the window. In case things get worse, there will always be a tree to look at, I thought. The house had a number of old, wide mango and jackfruit trees that casted pretty shadows on my small bed and brought back home-like feelings.

“Human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions”

— **Salman Rushdie,**

MOUSETRAPS AND RUMORS



MOUSTRAP I

Childhood days,

I fall prey, sometimes lying

in my bed.

The twin dolls with golden hair

Blink blue from the upper shelf.

Cousin brother runs his fingers along
The hem of my frock
Cat nears the fish bones and rice, uneaten.

LUNAR ECLIPSE

The moon glimmered like a brass dish underneath the kerosene sky. Grandma mashed rice and lentils into little balls for me. “They used to be one in the beginning.” Grandma went on, “One day he drank the potion of the gods and became immortal. For you know, they were not supposed to be immortals so Lord Vishnu cut the demon into two. But he already had the Amrit and could not die. So he hovered the space as two demons—Rahu, the head and Ketu the body. To avenge this damnation Rahu went after the moon and gobbled it whenever he caught up. That is what we call Eclipse. Eat your dinner fast and go to bed if you do not want to see the demon devour the moon.” My heart froze.

I saw Mahadev, the farmer man, separate heads of the birds from their fluttering bodies in two quick chops that day. I have heard (even from the second-floor veranda) the kok-kok rising in the mysterious light and dark in front of the kitchen where Mahadev sat with his cleaver and the stump. Coils of smoke from the *Unon* spread, smudging people who stood around. Stap! Stap! Off went his cleaver every few seconds. The fluttering pile

of birds on his left turned to a quiet mound of feathers on his right ...late evening inked and fogged them all.

Scared for a world about to lose the moon, I cocooned into Grandma's silk-cotton breasts and squeezed my eyes shut to fall asleep.

THE POPCORN TREE

Baba brought home a thorny mulberry twig and said it was going to make a "fantastic thing" for Jhulon's craft project. We spent the next afternoon watching him plug popcorns on the thorns. "What is this?" my sister asked. "Have you seen a snowing tree?" he replied with a dreamy chuckle on his face. We hadn't, except in the book of Russian fairytales. They looked dark and tall and fairytale girls walked lost among them. This mulberry twig with popcorns on its thin little branches ... Oh, Yes!! It WAS a snowing tree—just like in the fairytales! When it was done, Baba planted it on a bowl of wax—"Frozen field". We could see it all. More real than even the shows in television. Jhulon returned from school; tears dry on her cheeks. "They plucked all the snows from the tree and ate it before I could submit." Her voice watered.

MOUSETRAP II

Twenty years it will take
us to see snowing on the trees, for real.
Standing naked and tall for miles,
the foreign vegetation...
We will walk the snow,
not at all like popcorns
But, sea-shells and ash, much colder than both
will crunch beneath our feet
slowly and lonely,
in the United States of America.

POEMS ON MISINTERPRETED LINES OF ANDREW JORON



“Word that opens a solar eye in the middle of the night”

The bangle comes open,
unlocked where the coils,
weddings, songs and fire
entered the golden knot
to stay put forever. Instead,
lets space in. air in. year in.
Instead, it opens ...

“Poetry before taking action, listens to the speechlessness of words”

You knit for the love of family and the butterflies. You fetishize sweaters, socks, stories. To keep them warm when the veranda gets blue your needles plunge into the eye of slipknot—curves, coherence, sounds. You brace the song and release all its flowers into the chimney. You wait for the times to get fragrant. You knit for the love of stitching clock towers to his shirt, the heartbeats of your infant to the sunflower-seeds. All this while, the palanquin moves through another Christmas country. It moves till it stops in the middle of a pattern half-done. Words scatter like bees from hive to the garden with trees such as people, fallen birds, girls and silent winter scarves.

“I longed for the discovery of sound”

–Of the coming of milk, frangipani bloom
on sore nipples upon her arrival.

I longed for children who
spilled before incarnation.

and for the glowing skins of shopping centers.

–of the yellow fishes, never brought home

–of the night after they took out the Diwali lights.

“...an image swims best when it is close to drowning”

Evenings without electricity, rain or wind

The house stood by the pond,

Wrapped in goat-skin, raw.

Asha di's glaucoma eyes closed in

She rolled and fired one year after the other.

“Do immeasurable spaces exist inside one point?”

Get the ship ready,

Can you really cross over to the other side of the dinner table and touch

his inside with yours?

Do insides exist?

Between first word and the last

can there be a song, for all?

“Memory itself is an eternal rumor”-- George Santayana

MEMOIR

Like the skin on your four-year knees

your family of cats

had little to hide.

Your family of birds—

father, feather, fairy mother

flying on a scooter

those early years in Jalpaiguri ...

Where did it begin, those gooseberry winters?

Right there, nobody's cat plunged.

swift as fog and vanished forever.

You can recognize still

the gully uncurled into the evening library,

thin readers, half-shirts?

In your dreams

squeaky sandals

slipped inside a comic book.

You would like to turn

turn through the uncombed locks

of continents left

of houses lived and fled.

Turn till your fingers are caught

in silken wings of a butterfly.

Broken.

Seconds before you knew man-lips

mangoes blossomed on your chest

the city garden soaked

crushed afternoons.

Seconds before they walked miles away

rust and salt lingering

bells of anklets, lost

sisters watched peacocks and rabbits chase

(their) pearly eyes clean as stone.

Those years of early alphabets

bleeding heart, a flower

or, sisters in same silly frills.

It will be easier to heal

Heal from Michigan snow,

thousand faces, origins unknown
if you stood in front of the old house
to touch the rotten floors,
with your moonish cheek
heavy still from the waters of Teesta.

You know this, the tangerine spill down your elbows,
the blot on your teeth and tongue;
you get two for fifty paisa,
the sickly chill of popsicles
in Jalpaiguri.

Mountains closed
on your four-year chest.
The forest beneath your flesh
remembers half of everything—

Popcorns drop,
Bur flowers too
from your hands
into the lake.

MOTHER, UNSEEN



I have never known Bharati Chaudhuri, my elder grandmother, except only through one photograph (if there was another, I have no recollection of it). At first, it was on one of the walls of the house built by my grandfather, then Baba took it out of the rusty frame and got it laminated after we moved to the second house that he built. Since then it was put on different walls and shelves at different times.

My biological grandmother (not the one we knew as Thammu) must have been a quiet person. Only few things about her life were shared in piecemeal anecdotal fragments by a number of family members including Baba, Maa and my uncle Arijit, aunt Asima among others. And in all those stories too her presence somehow slipped in the background.

The box of her memories was revealed (and this verb, you will know is not accidental) only after my second grandmother passed away rather peacefully and suddenly as she was seized in her siesta by a mortal heart attack. Until then, we took the black and white lady holding the really round-faced kohl-eyed black-and-white baby (my father, as he referred to the circular face of that baby and explained how he

got his nickname Chandu—the moon) as Thammu, the grandmother who we have been with.

They say grandpa was ready to leave material life behind to walk the path of Sanyasa after she died. But Naresh Brahmachari, his Guru, counselled against the decision and insisted that he continue raising his boys in the best way possible. So, he remarried to lose the second wife too and lived on after for many more years. We never heard him talking about the mother of his boys.

“She is Borodida” – the elder Thammu, I remember being told one day. It would be some more years before we solved the conundrum of having two paternal grandmothers and only one grandfather. In our generation multiple marriages have become a rarity in middle-class Bengali families.

She was warming up milk for my uncle Arijit who was only months old when fire from the stove lipped the end of her saree. My father was six, his second brother four. Nobody ever spoke about the accident with any more detail. How bad was the burn? Was she hospitalized? Who else was in the house when that happened?

She was born in Berhampur. Her father, being a revolutionary fighting the war of Independence of India, had spent years in jails while the family struggled to stay afloat. Nonetheless, they did manage to survive the dark times and saw the face of comfort and fame when Independence happened and her father was positioned as one of the higher government officials. In our family, Chhatrapati Roy, Bharati’s father, came to be known more for his enormous gluttony than his love for the country or his efficiency as

a state's official. If you are one of us, you must have heard how he finished an entire cauldron of ghughni at one go!

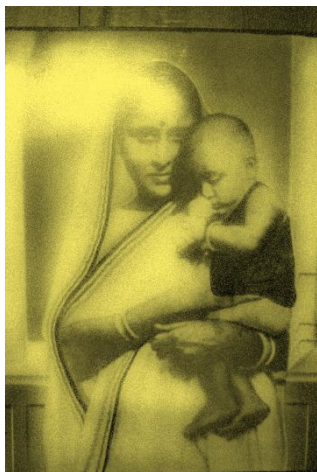
"Her childhood was a sad one," Baba said when I called to learn more about Borodida. He said he was too young when she disappeared but his voice always sinks a little whenever we talk about her.

Bharati's mother doted on her grandchildren. To this day, Baba remembers numerous delicacies she made for them and the diarrhea that followed over-eatings every summer.

There are not many left today who knew Borodida beyond the photograph—her voice, pace or how she tampered her daal. We visited Borodida's cousin, Grandma Nalini, every once in few years till she too entered the world of photographs. Tears dampened her crumpled skin softly like those creeks that never go dry as, our faces, she said, brought a long-lost sister back.

After we hung up, Baba called back.

"She was really beautiful and loved her brothers and sisters. They said she



probably had an artistic bent (I forgot to ask how that was revealed. Did she paint prettiest paisleys on the doorstep? Did she know how to maneuver the needle to create bouquet of roses on a piece of cloth?) and an emotional mind. When your Dadu's wood business failed, he had to wrap up his life at the Dooars forest and come to live in Chuchura. She took it hard

and was probably depressed ... I think, we have another picture of her somewhere ...I will look ...”

Baba’s voice trailed off into the international static ...

“Do you remember when it happened, I mean, the accident?” I asked.

“1956, 22nd of Shravan, August days like that are usually downcast ...you know with clouds and rains ...”

“Oh.”

The owner of the photo studio being a friend to my father took the liberty of adding a jacket to the originally naked body of the babe, he had also darkened the border of her saree and came up with this touched-up laminated copy. It gathers dust over one of the corner shelves and is cleaned every once in a while. We could never find out her birthday or what was the color of the saree that she is wearing in the photo.

FLYING FISHES

Flying fishes or memories when chased by a predator sprint out from the depth of the ocean, batting tails against the surprised surface, spreading their fins wide, they take flight like leaps into the air space to survive.

PISTIL



Those fingers were always damp and listless – their under skin pale from dicing too many fruits and roots on bowty. At the weddings and rice ceremonies they pulled

chairs from the rows into rounds and sat themselves right at the edge of the wild airflow of the decorator's pedestal fan. Some spilt wind spoiled their shampooed coiffure and from certain angles, they did look like fereshtas. As the party thickened with people and blazing filaments, sweat broke out on the talcum-smearred necks and trickled like the strokes of a delicate sable brush along their made-up side-burns and bloomed wildflowers on their foreheads. They unfolded plastic hand-fans from their vanity-bags and fanned vigorously giggling secret jokes onto each other. Star light sparked their otherwise piscine eyes. She found herself at the pistil of this circle, suffused with whisperings of yet-to-come-out love-stories, of family scandals and dream visions, about misdemeanors of girls and boys. When asked to smile for a photograph one of them tucked the revealed bra-strap of another into its rightful hiding under the blouse. Then they all faced the camera spreading fine threadworks of their aachols on the laps. Their faces tilted back a little, freezing between effort and laughter.

SOUTH-WIND



Windows are opened wide. There are sixteen of them in our house facing the south to welcome the air at the beginning of spring when it unfurls over the distant Bay of Bengal and flows into the land. We want to stay longer in the balcony to dry off the damp of afternoon bath. Still unscathed by the summering sun, this air ruffles the wet

locks, carries the shampoo smell over the lakes behind. Some of them are spellbound under the oozing pink and thorns of the bougainvillea on the balcony grille.

One can never prove but can only feel it rolling underneath like pebbles inside river water. A pain when it bursts inside the cuckoo's throat, he cries out loud and purple breaks the sultry silence of the noon ruptures all around. The bird, embarrassed, it seems by the sweetness and intensity of its call, hides itself behind the foliage of mango and jackfruit trees.

When the south wind blows, our Maa replaces the polyester curtains with those lace draperies so they swell and flutter like sails of invisible boats. She has small brass bells stitched at the hem. When the south wind enters, the house chimes in the background. On the foreground though, Baba's scooter hiccups before starting, screams and reprimands climb onto each other until they tumble out of the window and melt with the neighborhood chaos. On the foreground, the girls dress for adolescence—braids and ribbons are a must for school, Maa's saree softens under exhaustion and kitchen vapor and the wind roams around like a stray unnoticed and sometimes kisses the poor woman frame of the maid as she rubs grime off of the stainless steel and windowsill.

DREAM HOUSE



A smidgen of morning sun escaped the rusty grilles of our otherwise shadow-laden apartment in Jalpaiguri and smeared the living-room bed. Baba gathered us in that garden glow and asked for a pen and paper. He did that when he was about to explain a trick of numbers, except today he held it like a brush and conjured the house, narrating each of its windows, the balconies and steps like a castle in a fairytale. You had to listen closely and memorize the details for if you did not, you might be lost when you got there.

The girls had tucked themselves in the space Between Baba and Maa and together as they admired the dream of a house that now sat on the paper.

Then as it realized on earth, grew room by room, mosaic floors to tinted windows, attained great appetite. After finishing the loan money, the walls and mosaics fed on his American camera, swallowed some of grandfather's retirement fund, and lastly ingested four gold bangles from Maa's wedding before it burped and rested to age by the pond.

PUKUR



The mud settles after monsoon, opens the water-world. Sun enters the shallow bottom illuminating the opaque pond like a mountain stone. The kind you chance upon on a trip to the Himalayas and keep it forever. Small shoals of tilapia glide over the mystery and geography of things lost and resting. They swim up and nibble air every few minutes. She hides her princess there, living in a secret chamber beneath that silt-covered head shape, which could be a skeleton or a ball of gold who knows and waits for

a glimpse when she comes out to cast a spell. But she shows up only in the stories and songs inside sleep.

An aged Mrigel turns up alone, swimming into the lit clearing near the wall that separates their backyard from the pond. "Is that you?" She asks, leaning from the other side. The fish ducks and burrows into the emerald spread without answering.

Every few months, the pond owner's fisher folk arrives. They move the water, loosen the mud and it spreads over the kingdom. As the net draws in, her heart throbs like the fishes trapped inside. She wishes the princess to escape, she waits for her to get caught.

The men leave when their iron drum is full. Sometimes they forget one or two at the bank. Sun shines on fish-bodies, fallen leaves, and mud.

TREE STORIES



Her small leaves yellowed at the first touch of chill. Then as the northern wind roamed waking the hairs on the little girl's skin, they butterflied out from the branches and dotted the afternoon verandas and streets with a certain kind of magic. A magic with no reason and few audiences.

Winters were when she bled most painfully. Barks cracked and thick red resin oozed from the wound. In the house across the street, the girl lay on the roof—menstrual aches raging in her body. The two friends burned under noonday sun.

Whenever the boy came to see the girl, now almost a woman, her breathless branches would burst with round little leaves. He saw those leaves on his way to her home from station and knew it was spring. All their moments together in the hundreds of years before and after a shoal of yellow leaves followed.

MOTHER'S FACE



My mother's face defies the touch of rhetoric. The lack of adjectives loosens the memories of her shape and only threads of smells and colors fly around thrumming in the void. Years ago, when after lunch she rested, her hair fell to the floor like a dark curtain and whispered about rivers and forests unseen to the sisters who gathered close heady from its warm oil-shampoo breath. They wanted, so wanted to rub their faces on

those curls but never ever could for that would make the Maa, the sleeping goddess very very mad. She shaped her nails in a triangle shape and lacquered shimmering hues on them. Maa lined her feet with aalta that cracked like desert earth during winter. She knew when the womb-lings were only pretending to sleep and stood by their beds blazing till the pretensions fell away into slumber. She cleaned their vomit, poop and pressed sugar on cuts. She spanked them for she knew no better, for her slender limbs burnt out with a pair of kids who broke her favorite flower vases. She pressed sugar on her cuts and theirs. She pressed harder on callouses under her feet. In one of the photos, she is seen flying on a swing. Whenever she meets a river or the ocean or a creek much smaller, she raises her saree's fall just to dip her feet.

EVENING WALK



In those delicate purple afternoons, Baba took them for a walk along the brick-roads and alleys of the town with mountains in its skies. The canals crawled with them like creatures, bottomless. The boys squealed from its gut for they always caught some fish or small spidery crabs.

“Move your hands like the soldiers and keep the backs straight,” Baba taught the sisters till they reached the lake, brimming green and ghostly. By its side rested a wrinkled, old temple and the grand banyan with root sprouted from everywhere. They all joined the men who sat quiet, staring at the water. Fishing poles lay beside. “How

many today?" the sisters wanted to ask but Baba hushed. "You'll scare the fishes if you talk." So they too waited on the damp grass by the lake. Evening turned the water into night.

“Fiction is the truth inside the lie.”

— Stephen King

MATADOR

At first, the cloth inside her mouth felt dry and she stood still inside her disheveled breath. Where the old stairway turned to the second floor, there was this corner that could shelter her whenever she wanted to hide. She stuffed her mouth with more frock-frills, which made her cheeks swell up like a monkey and the skin inside hurt a little. But she sucked hard and then it was all wet and tasted deliciously of fine dust, bit of khichri from breakfast and some almost familiar things she could not place in smell or taste. It always calmed her down. She loosened herself in the dark. The wall against her back was cold with hundred years of uncleaned shadows and soothed her summer-singed skin.

High-pitched wailings like the arms of a sea creature lashed in the air and drowned the moment after under the usual gurgle of the household on the other side which had become a strange new land since yesterday. The rooms were all in place, the orchard, the people, Maa and Ranididi, the maids and the cooks ... everyone still had the same smell and shape about them but also had changed mysteriously. And they said, grandpa was dead.

She knew when he woke up for he switched on the radio hanging from hook. The first broadcast of Vandemataram wafted into the room as she lay awake between Maa and Grandma in the widest bed of the world.

“Dadu, good morning!” she said, sitting up.

He was dressed up, like every day, in his clean dhoti and punjabi for his morning stroll.

“Morning, Morning!” He answered as he opened the balcony door.

The morning was light and runny like the insides of an egg. Mint-green air blew into the room past the mosquito net trembling softly under the ceiling-fan. That was just yesterday, the day before and for as long as she could remember the summer holidays.

The thought of egg slipped right into her belly giving rise to a random hunger. It pulled her out of the shadow, down the stairway to the kitchen. She stopped once, suddenly aware of the crumpled and soggy patch of her dress smelling ever so faintly of her mouth.

“What are you doing? Go eat before they bring his body here.” An uncle hurried past her in the corridor not caring for an answer. In this big house with so many of them everywhere, elders often behaved like that.

Midday sun swayed above like a big angry flower and dazzled her for a moment as she stepped into the wide uthon between the kitchen and the main house. A crowd cluttered the space but unlike other days nobody seemed like they wanted to eat. Instead, they spoke in low dark voices. Kalomoni, the cat, pawed cautiously at the fish basket near the tap. Chhotomama’s goats huddled in their pen and stared into. Nobody shooed. Even when Kalomoni lowered her head too close to look into the still, marble eyes of those fishes, nobody came to spank the creature with the jute stalks piled at the corner for burning. The cat, now more confident about the sudden stroke of luck,

jumped right into the basket and sprinted off mouthing a big piece. She gulped the scream of excitement not sure if it would be welcome.

“There you are!” Ranididi came out of nowhere and took her into the kitchen. She was in her yellow maxi with butterflies and roses printed all over them and it made her look like a walking garden bush. Ranididi was in charge of her whenever she came to visit grandpa and family. She got money and a new set of salwar kameez in return from Maa.

“You know what happened to Burobaba?”

“He missed a step and rocked and rolled down the third floor stairs like a bottle-gourd.”

“That’s no way to talk! Don’t you say ‘bottle-gourd’ okay? And he is not coming back. Understand?”

“Okay.”

“Now wait here and I will get your lunch. No fuss today. Okay?”

They were out in the orchard playing water-and-crocodile when someone screamed from the balcony, “Burobaba, porey gyachee!” and a few elders rushed into the house. They did not go at first for the yard was infested with crocodiles and nobody wanted to lose by walking through the crocodile zone. But when the ambassador pulled in front of the house and was most certainly more exciting than crocodiles and creek that were not even real, the game dissolved and they gathered around the vehicle and followed the doctor into the house. The room where he was put, buzzed with concern.

“Is there blood? Is he awake?”

“Is the head cracked?”

“Oh! Dr. Mohanty is here. Get a cup of tea, someone ...”

Someone stopped them at the door.

“Everybody clear out—no kids, go go go getouttahere!”

Then, they shut the door and kids went back into the orchard and played fall and crawl. They played and played while the tea was served to the doctor and the ugly white car (‘Ambulance’, Ranididi said) arrived and took Grandpa away. Da-Dup-Da-Dup-Da-Dup hearts raced, dust fuzzied their feet and muddied their childish sweat and clay wrinkles meandered along their slender necks and sideburns. They gasped with too much fun in fall and crawl—best game ever! The power went out as usual after sundown. Ranididi filled the rusty bucket from tube-well and helped her wash. The house seemed darker like someone mixed two evenings into one. It gave her chills.

“They have gone to the hospital with Burobaba,” Ranididi said.

The well water splashed sharply against her skin and broke into million bits hitting the concrete. It almost became a song. Maa tore her rotis into milk; her face silent and heavy. After all, they took him in the big white car. The telephone screamed in the middle of the night. She woke up and went back to dreaming of candied things and merry go round all around her. She kept lapping at pink sugary cloud but there was no taste on her tongue. She heard footsteps and mother’s voice once behind the candy-floss dream and a door slammed somewhere.

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Belly full with daal and rice, she wandered aimlessly—pacing from the drawing room to the three magic mirrors and the shelf where grandpa kept the box of *Daanadaar*. The house was filling up fast with people—kakimas and mamis, uncles and jethus, so many old-men and so-many-babies began coming in. The big white car never returned. Instead, a matador brought in the block of ice. It was big, the biggest one she has seen in the seven years of her life. They put it under the tree and him on top. The circle of people grew and grew like ants around an enormous sugar cube.

“Oh-what-a-loss.”

“Such-a-loss.”

“Sudden! So sudden, can you believe it?”

“Tch, tch, tch ...” Croaking voices, broken voices.

The big red telephone kept ringing every five minutes ...and the news of him rolling down the stairs, news of the white car speeding to the city, news of the biggest ice cube under the Bombay mango tree had crossed the ether, the earth, wielding thick roots and thin, they flew to all ten directions like pigeons and winged snakes like in the stories ...

Squatting deep onto the grey bathroom floor she bent her neck down, down into the rising unease in her chest, unlistening to the increasing chorus of cries and released herself for a long one minute.

Dadu, on the big-huge ice bed lay quiet and funny with cotton balls plugging his nostrils. She sneaked in the crowd, mumbling and weepy and went closer. His pale, puffed face, the frozen wrinkles and moon-hair, the punjabi and dhoti. He looked like a

doll of him. Someone dotted his forehead with sandal drops and someone emptied a bottle of *oguru*, a scent so thick and witchy that her head whorled. Strands of vapor wafted from the block of ice and touched her knees like candy floss and she froze overwhelmed by the beauty of it all. Someone dragged her out.

“Dadu looks funny, everyone looks funny.” She whispered in Ranididi’s ears. She too had a heavy face, wet and annoying and carried her fast from the crowded living room where weepy aunties and grandmas circled Maa and Dida, disheveled, liquid and sad.

“Is he not cold on that ice? How long will he be ‘no more’?” It seemed she tried to form a smile, but Ranididi’s face contorted into an ugly gloom. She felt it rise in her chest—tiny like soda bubbles swimming upwards fast and bursting—a feeling of she did not know what. Restless, her feet jittered and she went to the mirror and looked into one hundred herself. She closed her eyes and played forever dead.

People surrounded Dadu, the forever dead, people and water, water and moan ...the faces muddied and funny with tear and snot. She tried squeezing her eyes and curled and uncurled her face to create a similar look. She knew what it was—the thing inside her—soda bubbles now getting bigger and bigger like a great yellow balloon. Dadu, dead like a bottle gourd, kept sinking under garlands and musty odor of withered flowers swelled into the afternoon air. Like a doll he was decorated, dots on his forehead, Tulasi on his shut eye lids.

She wished that thing in her chest would vanish and wanted to sit by Maa, mused with tears and sad. But it kept bouncing, like in a field of festivals. The weepy elders and clownish dead on the big ice bed... rattled and rattled it more. She slipped away, wobbly almost from holding it for too long. It was now huge and heavy and ready to burst any moment ...

The men transferred him finally from the ice block to a bed and loaded him on the matador. The bed of ice remained, a little smaller by then but still a lot to melt. In the shadows of old stairway, she burst out laughing.

A COLOR IN MIND

It was surprising how much of a city could remain unknown even after one spent a lifetime living in it. Kaberi sent the rickshaw-puller for the third time in the last ten minutes to go ask for the address at the roadside shop. The man must have been new to the area otherwise they rarely honored such requests without cribbing or asking for extra. The lanes were mostly empty at these last hours of noon. Mid-April heat blew in slow heavy waves. This part of the city still had majority of middle-class houses rendering an almost mofussil shape to the neighborhood.

“Didi, they said it should be a left from that children’s park ahead” the man said climbing back on his seat.

Sweat rolled down his forehead. He pedaled hard to get the motion back on the rusty wheels. She asked the rickshaw to stop at the gate of the only house on that block undergoing a paint job. The color palette announced festivity. She did not have to check the number for Soma had described it (*Happy Sunshine*, she said, was the name of the shade) at least twice since her family finalized on the paint. The narrow front yard was strewn with bamboo ladders, tubs of paint and alum. The walls were on their way from an aged grey to a wedding yellow. For a moment she wished she had not come.

“There you are!” Soma’s voice trilled from the second-floor balcony.

Kaberi looked up to smile but she had already left to get the door.

“Finally!” she opened the door with her characteristic smile revealing the molars. Soma was not stunning but had a casual sort of prettiness that flashed every once in a

while. She was in her outdoor jeans. Before Kaberi could ask, she explained, “My god! If you went to the parlor today, the entire Kolkata is getting hitched or something. They had eleven girls getting the wedding-package facial! Tell me you believe it!

“Really?” Kaberi responded with surprise in her voice. She had never really been to a beauty parlor. Back in Mohonpur, before marriage carried her off to the city when she was nineteen, a little enamored with the slender girl face in the mirror, beauty parlors were things only heard of but never seen or to be experienced by the daughters of group C government officials. After the date was finalized Maa kept the milk-fat every day in a bowl by the bathroom door. Sitting on a wooden block in their forever lightless bathroom she rubbed her skin fairer with it.

“Do you want tea? Or wait, lemonade will be better; it’s burning outside.”

“Arey! You don’t have to be so formal. I am fine!” Kaberi said but her throat was parched.

“Uf! Nothing formal, just being normal! Wait a second. “Soma left to get the lemonade, seating her in the smallish living room.

While she waited, a memory caught her unprepared. It was the day after their wedding. When he heard Kaberi had never been on a boat, Subhas jumped out of the bed singing excitedly and out of tune “ar bilombo noy, noy”. He made her change, pelting her with kisses while she wrapped a new saree. The boatman at Babughat asked thirty rupees for an hour. As the old man pushed the vessel into the water, she watched how the city lapped back. The boat swayed dangerously as if an enormous serpent was

trapped underneath. “Are you afraid?” he asked mocking. A sudden wind rose and her bun undid. Kaberi jumped back on the sofa, her body rolled with unease.

Soma entered lifting the curtain carefully with the side of her body balancing two glasses of orange colored sherbet on a plastic tray. A woman in her early fifties followed her.

“Maa, Kaberidi ...Kaberidi, my Matashri.” She introduced them using her eyes as a pointer.

“Please sit, sit,” Kaberi’s mother pressed— “We hear so much about you. She speaks of you as her big sister at the office.” Her mother spoke thinning the awkwardness of the first meeting.

The best part of having Soma around was she had a natural flair to garden words. Within minutes, words flew freely among the three of them. The nausea dissipated and Kaberi thanked God for soaring market prices, new faces in the television and sicknesses for keeping conversations unending. At one point, Soma’s mother enthusiastically switched the tele on as they were to screen a mega-episode of her regular soap. Kaberi was not a viewer but screens attracted eyes like helpless bugs.

The first time Subhas took her to tour his office she followed him bewildered by the rows of desks and glass-doors and was a little embarrassed in a warm kind of way at how people came up to greet the manager’s newlywed. Bridal sheen glinted off her skin.

On the second visit, the office was discolored and cold. Kaberi shivered the whole day—her initials waved on the paperwork. The new manager, Subhas’s junior,

led her to the work space explaining how much he respected Subhash Da and saw it personally that the paperwork for Kaberi's employment moved as fast as it did. For days, her heart raced in the office feeling Subhas' presence—invisible, but there. For days, people showed up at her desk, in the corridor, at the canteen expressing their dismay at the untimely death of “a promising boy like Subhas.”

For days, a knife ran, separating the world in layers unhinged. On one, he walked, he sucked the marrow off fish bones, flooded his rice with too much daal—there, his lips moved on hers restlessly like a boy trying to cover up a mischief and silenced her worries about those green clots that appeared on his feet every now and then, telling her it was just usual with his type of diabetes. On the other layer, people showed up at her desk to hold small talks on how lucky it was for her to get at least a job in this tight market. They resembled the old aunts who went on lamenting her misfortune, the curses of diabetes, the unfairness of hiding such a condition when setting up the marriage. They discussed the lack of a child, the good and bad sides of it at every family occasions. They kept their voices low but Kaberi could hear them clear, whispers trailed like mosquitoes. On this other layer, she sat every night, alone on their wedding bed with the medical papers, reading and re-reading the names and always rising numbers of his blood-work, slowly, learning each numeric combination, spelling out the names and components without anybody interrupting her concentration. Staying put in the cubicle helped slowly to blunt others' sympathy. She turned from Subhas's widow to the office supply manager and faded with the papers she stacked, separated and stapled, blended in with the pencils, folders, envelopes and the logbook.

She disappeared in the bus crowd of route 23-B, with the mornings and evenings of the metropolitan, the three-fold umbrella, the hapless monsoons and endless summers.

Then years passed.

On her first week, Soma came to ask Kaberi for office supplies. They ate tiffin together afterwards and had every day since.

“Kaberi di, you must come this Friday, Ma-baba want to meet you and I will show you the sarees. You cannot say no this time, please!” Soma pleaded last week.

On the television, the hero surprised the heroine with a bouquet of sunflowers, roses and ferns to put an end to a month-long argument and the special mega episode.

“That’s the one he got me for Valentine’s Day! It was so heavy that you cannot hold it for more than five minutes,” Soma exclaimed coming in with two oversized bags. Soma had been giving her detailed reports on how she and her mother ransacked the entire Gariahat to Burrabazaar market to pick the wedding sarees. Today’s invitation was to show the reapings of her hard-work.

Kaberi could not tell if it was the light reflecting from the silk threads or the magic of the bridal package facials that made Soma’s face glow like a winter dahlia. She spread out a Chanderi with fish motifs. “Do fish motifs make a saree non-veg?” Part of Kaberi’s mind wondered as she complimented the piece.

“Oh! You will be breaking hearts in such a blue, I’m telling you!” Soma blurted theatrically.

“Yes, yes, the hearts I shall break at this age! Then they will have me registered at *Mankundu Mental*,” Kaberi tried to turn the compliment into a joke.

“Don’t be silly, you have such fair complexion! I really don’t understand why you carry these ancient rules around—grieve by rejection! I mean, come on, this is like the twenty-first century! Wear white, eat vegetarian ... what has any of these got to do with grief, tell me—” The conversation was on quick-sand. It was true, they did not make any sense and she knew peacock-blue looked good on her but then there was Maa and white helped disappearance.

“Stop talking and show me the Baluchari you got last week.” She forced an eagerness and Soma, feeling she may have crossed the line a bit, took to sidestep reaching for the largest of the packages. She unfolded the Banarasi, blazing red Katan silk spilled like blood. The golden peacocks and paisleys danced on its body like in a festival. The room dazzled up with the spread. Kaberi’s head ached.

“It’s beautiful!” She complimented. She wanted to sound joyous, truly impressed in an unquestionable way.

“Isn’t it?” Soma’s mother chirped from the other room, “Got it from Priyogopal Bishoyee. Fabulous! They have fabulous collection!”

“They even let you try the Benarasi before you buy. How convenient, naa?” said Soma. Kaberi ran her fingers once lightly over the red silk—goosebumps. She took a big bite on the samosa and sipped on the hot tea, she stuffed her mouth, let the tea burn her tongue. She laughed louder than normal pushing down hard on the sharp, blue thing that suddenly sprang up like a nail in her throat.

His voice, warm and dark throbbed inside her as Subhas rolled his fingers in her curls. The river lapped against the boat. Creases spread all over her saree. Kaberi wanted to see his face but it seemed to lose itself in the abating day light.

“I told you a thousand times before widows don’t wear red!” She mumbled trying to sound clear and convincing, but the words slurred . . .

Subhas’s eyes seemed lost in the water as the afternoon sun crumbled fast into the gray of Ganga, weaving the water with diamonds.

“Fabulous! They have fabulous collection!?” A voice jingled excitedly in distance.

Her eyes focused hard on his toes, swollen and purple as they were on somedays—“it’s nothing... don’t worry” he said trying to cover the limp and pain with his smile and she kept trusting until she was falling with all the heaviness of her body...

“Madam, can you at least be straight in your seat?”

The lady in the next seat glowered. The bus had come to an unwilling stop at the signal, shaking the people inside hard out of the inertia. Startled, Kaberi straightened herself in a puzzled haste—feeling embarrassed and nervous at the same time and thought she must have missed her stop. Her body was still mute from sleep. “Dada, has Bakul Bagan passed?” She asked the conductor on the other side of the peopled wall and also sent the soundwaves within to shake herself up from the untimely slumber. Her throat was paper. The bus, jam-packed with sour home-bound office-folks scurried through M.G road highway, stumbling to undesignated stops every few minutes leaking and soaking more people. The air inside was thick as a blanket and reeked of rust, fatigue and sweat whorled into each other.

“Bakul Bagan, move! move!” blared the conductor’s voice from the other side of the bus. Kaberi stood up collecting the aachal of her saree, wiped the tiny puddle of drool that has gathered at the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand and pushed herself into the lumped muscle of headhandstoebreastlegsandcloth. She was not a very big person—a little thinner and shorter actually than average. Still thrusting herself into the crowd made her feel heavier. She moved her bag, body and saree curled in a blind, tight crumple towards the gate. Air gushed in through the door and peeled the remaining layer of sleep off her face. Only the eyes burnt a little bit. She propped herself on the iron hand-hold by the door. It was late and explained the awkward doze. She stared at the bunch of garlands, now wilted and tangled in a clot bounce on the gods and goddesses framed in the glass-box above the ladies-seats. “So vivid”, she thought flipping through the fragments of the dream—Subhas’s toes, the wrinkles on the saree—soon they dismembered like old parchment—flakes here, bits there, lost as the bus rushed towards the flyover. There was something about this moment that moved Kaberi always. The flyover took the vehicle high as if to shoot it into the sky. The city sanked down. Roofs and second-floor balconies could be seen from the window, sometimes a sliver of the peoples inside. These few seconds made her want to fly out like a bird, like that empty bag of chips. The door-boy banged on the worn-out tin of the vehicle and whistled. Kaberi heard water lap against the wood.

Kaberi’s parents and the aunt from Shyambazar went to get all the sarees for the wedding. She made the dinner and imagined pretty things and the man who smiled when his eyes met hers once. Only once.

The bus left retching balls of smoke all over her.

“Who can keep sarees clean like this ! Wash every day and they will soil every day!”

She muttered to herself. On other days, Kaberi waits to catch her breath, lets the smoke clear up fully to the open air before starting the walk home. But today, she started almost immediately fishing for the torch in the purse as she walked. Mother’s ayah needed to be released before nine-thirty. Her usual hour ends at seven, she was overstaying already.

Even though they have working street-lamps she uses the torch anyway. In the past few years Bakul Bagan have had flats springing up from every corner. When Kaberi moved into this apartment with Maa seven years ago, *Southwind Residency* was the only G+4 standing awkwardly among lowly homes with walls and verandas and muddy little ponds dotted this suburban para. After six months of sitting in the bed through sleeplessness, memorizing all those numbers and letters that mapped Subhas’s illness and his blood beyond oblivion, she left his house, his family and returned home. But home, it no longer was. It was awkward and white. And without answer. Mother-in-law insisted that she take the furniture, those wedding gifts and stuff when she heard about the apartment. Kaberi denied but, she had the dressing table delivered to her doorstep one morning. That too was six years ago. The neighborhood has been changing since. Now, houses with damp and green boundary walls and marble squares with their name and build-year rubbed shoulders with gaudily painted G+4s with English names. Darkness pickled them all together. The yellow luminescence hanging

in hives from streetlamps cast a baffling glow on the narrow gullies in between rows of homes and housings and made one dizzy. That's why she lit the torch, let the halo walk ahead. She followed it like a blind man lets his dog take him home.

The stair seemed to take a lifetime to cover. Kaberi changed the bag from her left shoulder to right. Soma's lover worked in Sector-V; Soma's lover like all other lovers liked blue and they met at a friend's wedding three years ago. He goes to America for work every year. He sent her roses on Valentine's Day. Soma showed pictures of him, them together on the park bench, at the restaurants—selfies and black-and-white ones. Smartphones can do everything, take pictures, play songs.

"I picked all traditional ones ...after all, marriage is once in a lifetime, tai na bolo, Kaberi di?" Soma said.

Kaberi tried remembering as she climbed the stairs where her wedding Benarasi was. It was a dark shade of brown. They said it complemented the gold. They said to never take the iron bangle off as it marked the husband's wellbeing. They told to braid her hair every afternoon, loose curls invited evil... never said Subhas had sugar in his blood. A lot—the worst kind. The fatal kind. They never said that he had been sick for years; that those green clots, those swellings of toes, that mild limp, they were all signaling of a rot so furthered beneath that even love could not revive it.

The red sarees were given away. Other colors left as if on their own.

Dulali, the matchmaker, said, relations like theirs were made in heaven. Indeed, made and stayed in heaven! Kaberi let out a muffled laugh. Mixed with her panting it sounded strange and hoarse. She changed the bag again to the other shoulder. It

seemed heavier. As if rocks have been forming inside on her way up. When she pushed the bell her knees were throbbing with fatigue. “Age, age will not take any medicine,” Kaberi muttered like the doctor when he wrote ineffective prescriptions for her mother.

“Who? Didi?” Ayaah’s voice came from inside.

“Yes, open up.”

The door unlatched almost immediately.

“Masima was just asking about you!” Ayaah was dressed and ready to leave.

“Has she eaten?”

“No, I told her to but she won’t without you.”

“Okay! You go ahead. It’s late already.”

“Achha didi, rotis are in the hotpot and I left the sabji in the kadhai itself.” She slid into her chappals and went down the stairs hastily.

Kaberi shut the door, hung her bag on the sidewall hook, took off her shoes and switched on the kitchen light in one continuous motion. Loud music came from Maa’s room. Clouds and drumrolls, violins swelling skyward—signaled catastrophe.

Television catastrophes always had violin in the background. They sorted themselves, unlike life. Maa was immersed as usual in the soap. The space flashed with light for a second before the flat plunged into darkness, thick and rubbery. Power cut. Kaberi stood lost in the middle of the room listening to the silence that always followed power outage. Televisions, lights and fridges all around went blind, fans fizzled out stopping people midsentence. She felt it on her skin, inside her eardrums as trillions of invisible electric worms went mute and hung suspended in the air. For a second or two the

sound of her heart was really loud. In the darkness, she saw the smallish living room dazzling blue, green, and red! The blazing, burning red! “Fabulous, fabulous collection!”

“Ayahh, get the candle!” Maa called from the other room.

“Maa, this is me. Wait a minute.”

“Oh, Kabi? When did you come back? I was asking her to call you.”

“Just now ...she told me. Why did you not eat?”

“Did not eat, my wish ...didn’t feel like it.” Kaberi could feel disgruntle in her voice but knew enough to not ask for reason, she went looking for the candle-matchbox instead. The generator came up. Kaberi served dinner in two plates—roti, sabji and milk for Maa. When she entered, she was lying on her side facing the wall.

“Maa, are you sleeping?” Kaberi asked before hitting the light switch.

“Nah, just lying down. What else can one do? Living like a prisoner on a single bed, and this electric, son of a bitch, will go right at the crucial moments!”

“Don’t be angry now, let’s eat, and come on, now.” Kaberi put the plates down on the corner table and switched on the light. Then went to help her up.

Once upon a time she hated her. Hated her for letting Dulali, the matchmaker, enter their house.

“Looks like Madanmohan, himself blessed this connection!” she said, pointing to the house god as Maa served tea and sweets.

“I say, get it done this monsoon. What do you think, a boy like him will stay forever? They won’t Didi, they won’t ...” Dulali paused to chew on her beetle nut. Her

lips were plump and rusty with the juice. "Look at her—such fairness and, matriculation passed too! Goddess Laxmi and Saraswati put together!" She went on till Maa was convinced. Subhas's family came to see her the following week. They matched the caste, horoscope. The marriage happened three months after.

A week later, sorting through their almira, Kaberi discovered the medical reports. She had been a good student. Woke up at five in the morning and memorized notes. Got a first division in matriculation examination. She read English and sort of understood. When asked, he said it was no big deal. He said, he liked her too much on the first day to risk the marriage by talking about silly medical stuff. She blushed. He then made love to her.

Once upon a time she hated Subhas for dumping her with all those gifts and furniture and families and surnames and leaving the scene undone. She hated him for hiding his illness from her, who just trusted, so stupidly trusted his words and touches. People thought it was shock that stopped the tears from breaking out. She stood obedient like a doll when they washed the vermilion off, dressed him for his last, broke her conch and coral bangles, removed the iron one, unbraided her hair. In truth though, an enormous ball of hate grew right in the middle of her body filling her full, sealed all the doors and windows. Hate shielded her from Maa, Baba, Subhas, her friends, and the rest of the world. Then one day it deflated as suddenly as it swelled. Then there was only a hole inside her. No hate, no sad, no red.

Baba followed Subhas next year. Went to sleep after his usual meal of rice. Next evening Ratan, the photo studio boy was dropping off his smiling face, framed in wood

and glass. Kaberi thanked the boy for getting it done so fast before his funeral. Kaberi watched Maa changing into white, same as hers. They looked like sisters. Years fell one after the other. They wore white, ate vegetarian. Sometimes, Kaberi knew the difference between Ma and her was closing down fast.

“When is the girl getting married? Your friend?” Maa asked breaking the silence that started setting in the room.

“Twenty third, next month,” Kaberi answered briskly.

“Love marriage?”

“Hmm. Did you walk today? I asked her to take you to the balcony in the afternoon.”

“What is the groom’s caste?”

“Ah, Maa ...why do you ask? Doesn’t matter ...Anyway, I don’t know.” Kaberi could not hide the annoyance. She knew the boy was a Brahmin, same as Soma.

“Why, what is in asking? It does not matter ...anyway, did they show you all the shopping?” Maa asked again ignoring Kaberi’s disinterest. She wanted to make conversation. Kaberi understood but, it is just that a ball swelled in her heart, up and down her throat. A ball that seemed to have deflated long back. She felt she might scream if she talked, scream and ask why could she not eat fish and break hearts in a peacock-blue Chanderi?

“Why the hell? Why the hell?” She hold the words throbbing like live things inside her throat without sound.

Maa did not have an answer. There was no answer. They chewed on in silence. The generator-run bulb was only 40 watts. It darkened the room more than illuminated. Soma's wedding threads and Subhas played on in a loop, like a song, a tedious, endless song in the shut, swelled paper bag that was her inside and out.

"Maybe they should check if the guy has diabetes!" Kaberi thought of teasing Maa. May be it won't hurt much, after so many years. Instead, she wrapped a big dollop of sabji with her roti and stuffed her mouth. Chilies hid among benign beans and okras and fibrous sticks of sajina and waited for a slip to set fire. The raw, unexpected sting watered Kaberi's eyes. She grabbed the water bottle and gulped down full.

"What? What happened? Ah! Chilies ... Take some sugar!" Maa insisted.

"I'm alright," Kaberi said. She stayed stiff on the stool staring into the blind square of the television.

The light came up after a while. The soap played on. They did not have to speak anymore.

The crocheted curtain had been on for as long as she remembers. She uses the mirror in the bathroom for brusque grooming. She dressed up and down in front of this more out of habit than anything else. She did not know how or why, after all this years, after all these days changing into the nightgown, her eyes drifted into behind the crochet. There she was, in flakes, loose yet together as if by the dim light of the overhead bulb.

Priyogopal Bishoyi saree complex stood high at the intersection of Gariahat Road. Twenty-three girls were getting the bridal package facial at the famous *La Belle*.

Not all of them were getting married. A lot of the city remained unknown to a lot of people.

“What can I help you with today?” the shop assistant asked Kaberi.

CHUMKI

You will probably not believe looking at him or, may I say, not really looking at him as you walked into his book store and asked for a Bangla khata size 4 that, at the potent age of seven, palmist Sri Joydeb of Bangaon, rubbed his beedi-stained fingers over the squiggles of his boyish palm and maintained "Not sadharan, not at all!" He let his hands go after and said no more. At the age of thirty-five, after working under his father in the shop for a decade, when the old man finally passed away, he took over the book shop, one among hundred others at the legendary book store colony of Kolkata where you see him every day and not really see him too.

His mother took the words of Sri Joydeb as a grand prophecy of a superior future for the boy. She pleaded for more and offered two hundred rupees extra (over the service charge of one hundred rupees) as pranami but Sri Joydeb had gone back in his meditative state and could not be disturbed further. As the following days fattened into years neither Gourhari's bay-leaf skin came aglow like superior beings in television tales, nor was there any other sign (like winning a cycle or a color television with the Ghari detergent surprise coupon) moving him towards anything but the grayed middle-class fate of the family. Like you may have guessed from the nonchalant mustache on his Safeda face, his years at Mallik-Bati School too passed noiselessly as he trailed from one class to the next and finally quit after high school. You will probably not be surprised at all then, when I tell you, Gourhari, who now came up with your notebook, took seven rupee and seventy-five paisa for the price and went on to take the

order from the customer second in line from you that he was complete in a furniture sort of way, fully unsurprising in his long-cloth shirt and trousers, in his liking for Gursandesh, sweet-water carps fried or in Kalia and monsoon Hilsa (in any preparation) among other delicacies. For Gourhari, Hilsa can only be tasted as memories for they get more expensive every year.

The day he was taken to their house to formally meet her, she wore a saree in the color of onion. Maybe because of that his eyes burned a bit when he stole a brief glance at the girl. After he nodded an awkward consent to the match, Gourhari got into a secret habit of looking at her photograph, which his mother kept at the top shelf of the showcase in their drawing room for the convenience of showing the future bride to the relatives. But this is just one of those details in this story that can safely be forgotten as Gourhari never got the chance to get any closer to her (except in those unspeakable sort of dreams where he furthered his reach into her and it made him heavy with guilt the next morning but he could not deny the choking loveliness of it all). She – the one who wore onion-colored saree and singed Gourhari's eyes only mildly – ran away with her lover the day before the wedding.

The unprecedented sharpness with which it cleaved the sadharaon heart of Gourhari into few pieces and let loose the shards into his blood disheveled him for a whole week and generated a small column in the local tabloid. He stayed in bed listening to the broken heart bits clog and throb in strangest locations in his body while outside the family sorted things through abuses and cries. After a few longer than usual

days, he shaved, after not shaving, after not sleeping, he slept soundly and was ready to return to the book shop.

The feeling was as distinct and whizzed like a ceiling fan inside his ear canal as he turned the keys to open the doors of the shop. The day went dry as a desert, not a pencil sold and it was no surprise to him as if he knew this like an episode of a play. In the course of next two seasons when the intuition recurred thrice and not an eraser or a taffy sold, he took this small bloom of clairvoyance for real but kept it a secret from the meager circle of family who no longer awaited his evolution beyond Sadharon.

Khokon, the young assistant at the *Banerjee Book Store* across the street from Gourhari's *Loknath Book-Corner* might claim that it was him who showed Gour Da the way to the *Dream-Queen Guest House* for "walking the stick out for play" Gourhari believes it was his secret aloukik power that found him Jui.

On days like this, when you do not need an eraser or a have a book to buy, a day weighing low under the intensity of the season—too bright or too damp, Gourhari feels a bit liquid and parts of him spills out of himself and seems to flutter in the air. He listens to the whispers in his ears as they herald the onset of a dry day. But he cleans the floor anyway, dusts the stacks of books and wipes the wooden counter with the old gamchha and kills a bunch of roaches with the Baygon spray. He smiles at Bacchu, who comes with daily garlands for all the shops in this side of College Street. Ten rupees apiece. He removes the withered flowers from the picture of the Goddess and the dead parents and puts the new ones up, he switches the candle-bulb and lights an incense.

Fragrant curlicues of smoke come down on the stacks of *The Question Bank* for classes V

to XII, *Student Companions* and dictionaries like creeks and disappears. And as you go on with your day, he sits on his stool behind the counter not waiting for any customer. When at the end of those days, College Street turns, a beaten brown, bulbs in his crumbling book shop, the halogen heads of the peopled city winks like sequins on a bridal veil Gourhari almost got a chance to touch, he drops the shutter.

Will it sound impossible if I tell you, among all others Jui, the woman, knows when he walks up the stairs of *Dream Queen Guest House*, she pushes the regulator up and wraps her bay-leaf skin with a bridal silk? Gourhari finds her eager on the charpai. She sparkled like a firefly under the fugitive lights of the glow-sign. In this, I tell you, beauty remains only half revealed.

RUPKATHA

First Trimester:

So this is a story about a girl. And how she was lost. And found. In a different world. Every time. This is a story about stories that circled over my head and perched on the branches of trees that had faces to them. For decades and centuries I had them within, beneath. Some kept me full and others emptied me. Of air, connect and love. These might not be make sense. But bear the madness a while till we reach the fairytales.

When the stick came alive with your possibility, I wanted to cry but couldn't. "If it is true then probably it is better this way," he said, "A little too soon, but ..." He embraced me never finishing what he started.

Then, I stayed in bed, swinging in and out of sleep inside the deafening sonar of the heart afloat on a full, watery sort of silence. Reaching out with all my synaptic fire, I wanted to imagine you, my child ...parts of you really ... a palm, a name, a smell from the balcony back home and it flooded me with a tense longing to unload. It came in like monsoon flood overflowing the carpet and doll-house walls of our apartment and unhinged long-locked doors loose and all that earth, miles beneath my planet had cracked fingers and pushed upward.

And now I cannot but go on.

Fairytale I

The night-lamp far up oozed a sappy iridescence into the bedtime darkness. Rajkonya blinked a few times to shake off the sleep, already starting to crust her eyes for the night. How could she sleep without knowing what comes after? But Maa wouldn't allow playing. After dinner she was to brush quickly and head straight for the bed. There she could wait for Baba. He would never finish the story at one go and made her wait for what seemed like an entire year before joining her. Lying alert and exhausted under the mawshari, she read the furniture sitting quietly but alive under the shadowy blend of light and dark that soaked the room. Baba and Maa could be heard wrapping up, stacking washed plates back on the shelves, tucking the chairs under the table, sweeping dust off the other bed to put the house to sleep too. Finally, he lifted one corner of the net and slipped beside her. Darkness green, darkness red. With his voice the darkness feathered, winged and watered. Darkness became an island and then it was moving—it became a monster whale in the tell-tale Pacific—

“Every direction you looked, waves and more waves rolled and rippled till they disappeared into the clouds afar. When the sun melted away into the water leaving tangerine spills in the salty oceanic air, Sindbad, the sailor, looked up at the north-star quivering alone like a lost piece of mirror in the vastness. His young sailor eyes failed to notice that in the far south-west the sky winked once, twice ever so slyly in the dark.”

“Storm.” The Rajkonya said.

It was hard to see him but his story went on in affirmation.

“Sindbad's ship swayed over the magic locks and curls of nowhere-sea. From this side to that, wind lashed. The sky and ocean played with the majestic ship like it

was fragile as a banana flower. They screamed prayers. Sindbad firmed his grip on the wheel. Can you hear the thunder?" Baba asked.

A sherbet air poured from the ceiling fan and even though his voice was right beside her and his fingers were drawing whales and waves on her back, it seemed but he had slipped out of the bed, on his story-boat somewhere between sleep and the bed-lamp. If she rolled closer to touch him, she will only fall into the cold of his long left kantha for he was gone far off. His voice and his touch surrounded her like a couple of spells and weaved only an illusion of his presence. She never opened her eyes. She clung to the story for as long as she could remember to do that.

"Baba, please bring the bird," she pleaded floating away fast into sleep.

"It flew in from afar, its widest wings spread across the sky and plummeted at the sinking ship."

She could never stay up till Sindbad was carried off on the rock bird's wings and was saved. So, she never knew if he really was saved or if he fell into the whirlpool and went down down down . . .

Second Trimester:

The body uproars and settles without direction. Takes me along like a boat down a mountain false. So does the firework inside the head—anger, laughter and sadness ... glow feverishly. Then I take the shirt off and the bra too ... to look at the odd smoothness of limbs, to look for you, in the mildest bulge of belly. It is not yet visible from the front.

He works late most days and for a second, I spent the afternoons run by the phonetics of night—the quiver of crickets and foliage talks that break into our still under-furnished apartment. I stand naked not knowing what to feel about the nest that they say is housing you, another human being. At twenty weeks, tsunami waves of fatigue sweep me off my feet. We are very happy. Now listen girl ... you must be very careful. These months are most crucial. Well-wishers go on over the phone. Their voices fatigue me. I nod and hang up. You can always blame it on the network in international calls.

Fairytale II

After the families have spoken on the phone and re-confirmed the list of compatibility as charted on their matrimony website profiles, Rajkonya was to meet him, talk about “things” and decide. She stitched words, smiles, lipsticks and handful of heartbeats together in agreeable paisleys willing to appear as whole and ready as the uploaded display pictures on her profile. Rajkumar drove in his Hyundai Santro and opened the door for her.

On the first official date, the fancy restaurant light fell over them like silk threads. “What’s your favorite color?” They asked and answers small questions of the high-schoolers. On the second one, he sipped on the tea “Do you think you will be okay, if you had to leave the country for some time ...I know it is not easy but there is a chance that you have to if we decide ...” He took her hands briefly as they crossed Sarat Bose Road, maddened by the homebound crowd. That night, she went back to see up-close, once more, the ball of his fingers around hers, the unexpected tenderness of the moment

and said “yes” the next day. Celebration broke over the kingdom like a full elephantine nimbus and went on pouring for days.

As part of growing up, they told her of the transition every woman (Princess or not) had to walk when she becomes a wife. Yet, she found herself stunned by the swiftness with which the architecture of home and people changed when the ceremonies were finally over and the air was clean of musty perfumes and flowers. It was like she slipped into an altogether new story. His face, and the laundry detergent they used were familiar but other than that, she stood awkward and tired in the new home, not able to put her feet down completely, restfully, at ease.

At nights, her body found his and together they opened each other, childlike in its rush, floral almost in longing. They flooded over the land, their minds were yet to cross to reach what they called love.

Third Trimester:

The website says you can hear now. Do you? What is it like in there? Do you feel lost, wrapped in such water and sounds without meaning?

It does not feel that strange—our conversations. Or, should I say my monologues. These days my focus never shifts from you—like I carry a camera pointed inward always, or an ear pitted to my body. These waits for your fingers to play the water and the ripples to rise from the dark to the taut of my belly.

Can you feel this? My fingers ... see, there are the three stars on Kalpurush’s belt. On a clear winter night (that is what it said in the geography book, but I believe if you lie under a big enough sky, really wide and unspoiled sky untroubled by buildings and

lights, you can see them every night). They are really easy to spot, the three diamonds of his belt. I will show you someday. Maybe we will go to the hills. Shushunia Pahar. It is not too high; one can climb to one of those roofoo rocks rather easily. We will lie down, and let the sky break open on us—all that faraway galaxies and planets—so low and lucid. Yes, you may kick and you may want to dip your fingers in the air, full of stony chill and grassy odors of mountain. You don't know what a sky is, or the mountain, do you?

Well ... sky is much like the water but away. They are always sending ships out—the scientists. Ships that sail out, sometimes they do not come back. Ships and humans are more similar than you think. You will know when you grow up.

Fairytale III

Those were her favorite, the games where you play someone else—a queen or a father who goes to the market or the doctor.

“You should get some sleep.” Maa would always insist after lunch. But sleep would never come to our Rajkonya during the day. Besides, it was just one week of vacation at the village home. Too short a time to be wasted sleeping. She never went back to their room after lunch. She sneaked out of the dining cottage and went exploring the big old village home, sometimes counting the windows, tapping on the cracked floors to see if the sound came back was a solid “thup, thup” or had that gong of a hole or a passageway—

“Old houses such as those were keepers of many spells and secrets.” Golpodida, Grandma-story told them when she started her evening session every day.

Her voice buzzed in Rajkonya's ears as she went to the poolside and stood on one of the plastered steps of the old stairway watching the maids do the dishes. The noontime sun shone on the metals and gilded the fat slow ripples that began where a pot or a human head dipped unfurling in neat geometric blooms. Vessels and the bangles on the maids' hands clinked rhythmically like keeping notes in an inside song and ran over the blunt buzz as they scrubbed the metal surfaces with ash and coconut-fiber. Every so often, shrill staccato of cackles and splashes of water drowned the ensemble. Then it resurfaced again. Thin vapor wafted from the calmer places in distance. Who knew who was breathing underneath? While they taught her to paint waters in blue with fine horizontal waves at the art class, this water was not at all like that. It was fat, mud-like and a sickly shade of green. Near the banks where the tamarind, wood-apple and bamboo bushes had limbs outgrown, the water frothed with shadows of an even gloomier shade. Suddenly, the air and the crows fluttered with a loud startling sploosh.

"Oyee! Bel porechee, Bel porechee!" One of the maids squealed announcing the fall of a wood-apple.

Those fruits, whenever she looked at them, reminded her of a bald baby-head without a baby attached to it. Goosebumps ran all over her, made her jump out of the step. She started a hurried walk back to the house when Benu and Papu, the cousin brothers, called her name from the second-floor veranda. Three of them slipped in and out of the darks under the lion-legged bed, behind the doors and shelves under closed windows. Funny worms somersaulted in their hearts and grew as they let out muffed

giggles, deceiving each other in turns. Then, before they realized they were the doctors and Rajkonya was their patient on the operation table. They poked her ribs with false injections.

“I think you are sick,” said Benu, his voice chockful with seriousness.

She grabbed her belly and twisted her face making it very real.

“What do I have, Daktar babu?” she asked.

“I think you need operation,” suggested Papu as per the script of the Cut-the-belly operation game.

“We will have to cut your belly open.” They announced.

“Okay, so I lie down?” she asked because you had to because it was the game.

“Yes and close your eyes, silly, you are senseless and cannot speak when we do operation on you.” The boys directed gravely.

She lay on the bed senseless and they poked her some more with injections. Benu cupped his cool palms on her nose and mouth for she needed oxygen too. It smelled of rust and sour inside his fist. Papu curled a pipe with his fists, holing it over the cotton flowers on her chest center and listened for her heart. His breath blew on her face like there was a tiny leak in the air there.

“Get the knives,” Papu asked Benu when a third voice stepped in the room.

“What are you boys up to?”

He was much older than them. He seemed more like an uncle even though he was their brother. His pajama had faded supermen flying all over.

“We are playing doctor-patient.”

“Ahah! And you are the doctors?”

“Yes, and she is our patient and we are going to cut her belly open because she is really sick and she needs operation.”

“Yes, I am really sick and I need operation,” she cried, a little bit annoyed at the interruption from her bed.

“Let me check how bad your illness is.” He walked over.

“But you are not in the game” Papu argued.

“Says who?”

She smelled pungent boy smell and a tinge of nicotine and that popped her eyes open wide. His face was like a brown balloon with eyes and nose and mouth floating closer to the ceiling which was full of other faces—a lion there, a monkey riding a cloud—rain water drips on alum. The balloon let out a cat laugh.

“You stink!” She said springing up.

“But I have a real stethoscope, if you would like. And look how I can cut and fix my fingers.”

He hid his hands behind and brought them back swiftly like a magician. His palms were joined in a strange way and his thumb wriggled eerily. He made pain sounds and false screams pulling at the finger and whoa! The thumb head came severed. It throbbed like the cleaved head of a cockerel.

“See? See it has come off! Now let’s put it back together.”

He does the trick again and with a quick clap his big brown palms opened like Japanese fans in front of their bewildered eyes. Then, the lure of the real stethoscope

was too hard to ignore. So, he became the head doctor. He flopped himself on the round mesh chair and ordered them to stand in line like patients in a hospital chamber.

“Show us the stethoscope!” They pleaded.

“In due time, children! Now who is most sick?”

“She is,” they pointed at her.

“Yes, I am,” she answered and climbing back on to the bed eager to move the game forward.

“Hey you! Go grab the stethoscope from my room. It is there in the book shelf.”

They were about to run to his room when he called her back.

“Why?” She asked.

“Come here, I will show you.”

Benu and Papu already sprinted out, trying to outrun each other and to get to the stethoscope first.

“Let’s rehearse the operation once before they return.”

Rajkonya laid down and heard him shut the door behind. The fan whirred like a million cicadas replaced the blades. Shreds of hot air fell from the ceiling. He forgot to ask her to be senseless. So, she watched the lion chase the monkey chase the octopus chase the monster and he peeled her dress off her belly and pants down her thin dusty legs. A power-cut came down on her and the earth went ice. Cords snapped in quick succession throwing the heart loose up in the air. His skin, his strange boy-smell and hairy weight fell on her like a jungle and the magic thumb and the Japanese fan dug up ink and pain.

Quick footsteps up the distant stairway on the other end of the corridor sent a mild quake along the red concrete floor and he wrapped her back in one swift motion and vanished like a magician.

“It was not there, your stethoscope.” Benu and Papu barged into the room gasping for air.

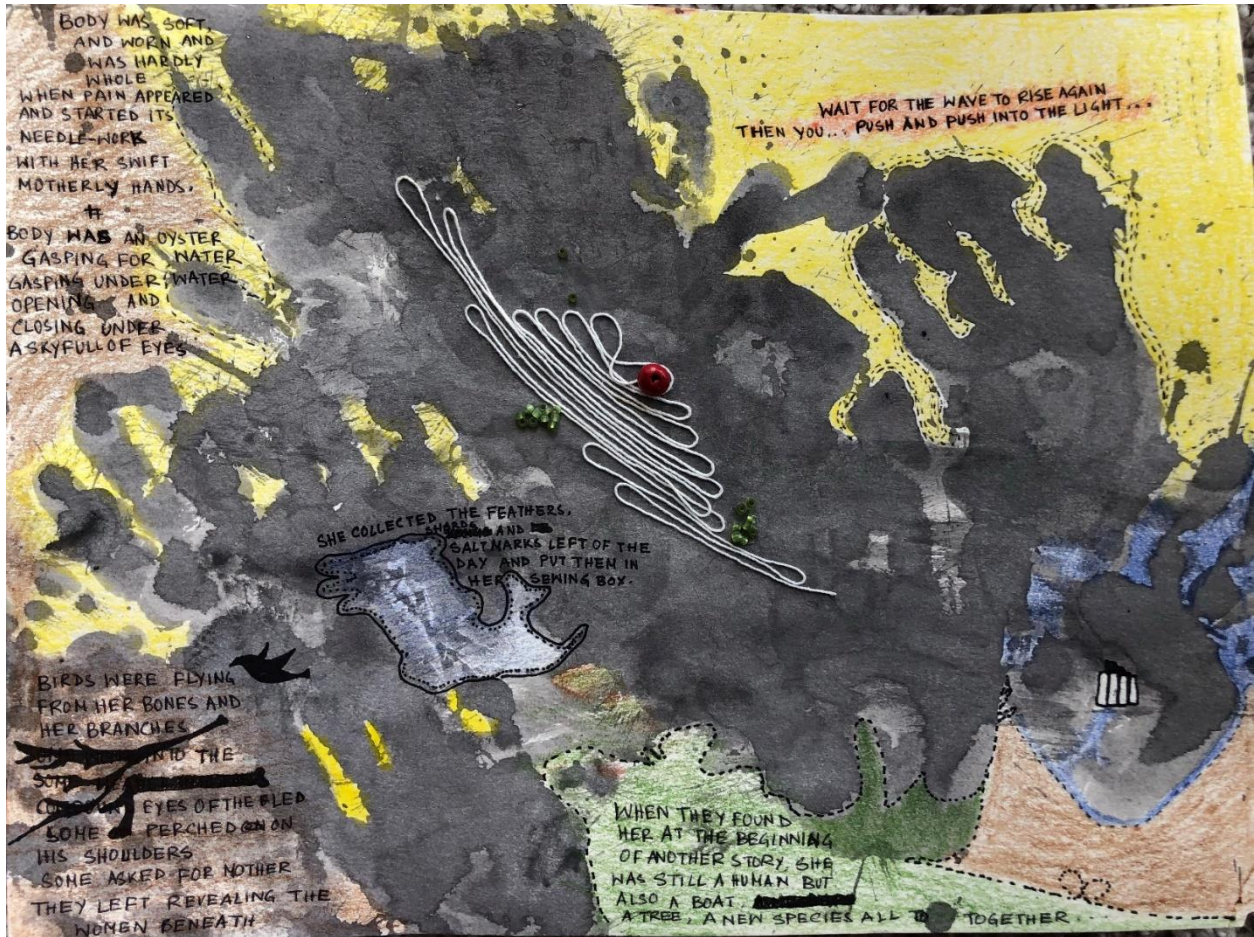
“What’s the matter with you and where is Ranadada?” One of them asked.

“I don’t know.”

One of her walked out, back to her room, one of her went back to school after vacation, one of her began bleeding a year after, one of her learned to iron her school uniform—red skirt, white shirt, tied red ribbon on her braid. One of her biked down the town streets, past the gullies, past the boys of the Deshbandhu High school—black pants, white shirts—hoo hoo hoo hooo ... Little boys and big boys screamed slangs and Bollywood songs in gibberish at her ears’ edge ... of her finished high school, bought lipstick, got her brows done at “The Blossom’s Beauty Salon”, took dance lessons and went past the years of monkeys with a racing heart and unhealable kaleidoscope of a nightmare.

The other one lay wide, lay awake under the jungle of dark. She watched the lion chase the monkey chase the balloon of a face of a monster for nobody asked her to lose her senses while he did operation on her.

THE WHITE HOLE



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