



# Luminous Eating

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# Luminous Eating

By Ayesha Mohyuddin

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In loving memory of my Dadu.



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LUMINOUS EATING

Afternoon Sink  
2017



LUMINOUS EATING



Prayer Room  
2017

# Home

When I think of a space where I feel safe, uncontained, and unburdened, I think of my childhood home. This space was a milieu of ease and comfort, a safe place where our Muslim Bengali and American selves could just be. The sounds and languages, rituals and routines, smells, tastes, colors, and textures of that space could be taken as a given. Though home comprised both the interior space and the surrounding rural Tennessee landscape, the feeling of home orients internally. It was normal, standard, nothing unusual. This was the environment in which I lived and thrived and just was.

But I feel compressed and constricted the moment I try to articulate my lived experience of home. The labels of identity I reach for—Bengali, Muslim, Tennessean—condense the infused milieu of my home into definitions legible to someone outside that space but that do not encompass the complexity of my own experience. This external pressure to be legible that I perceive from the question, “where are you from?” flattens my depth. It lithifies my lived experience into something defined and limited, as though every moment and interaction of my upbringing sediments into stone.



Fixating on these labels of identity orients my gaze away from the internal to the external, from my lived experience to the labels that attempt to describe that experience. Fixating on labels of identity removes me from the present, from my actual lived experience. Identity becomes external to me, leaving a distance between myself and my conceptualization of identity.

Yet even the way I conceive of home as a space of ease and comfort is a memory tinted with nostalgia. Memory is defined as “the faculty of encoding, storing, and retrieving information.”<sup>1</sup> Memory is not static; it is an active and dynamic chemical process between neurons inside our brains.<sup>2</sup> But nostalgia assumes that a particular snapshot of the past can summarize the whole. This snapshot is often a rosy, idealized version of the past marked by a longing to return to that moment. That moment becomes inflated, simplifying the nuanced complexities sedimented within it. Svetlana

Boym defines nostalgia as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed,” imbued with both loss and displacement, underscored with a “romance with one’s own fantasy.”<sup>3</sup> Can nostalgia “lithify” memory, and in turn, essentialize the complexities of history? Which in turn lithifies culture and identity, coalescing nuanced, entangled, and complicated realities into a sense of longing for an idealized version of the past? A simplified label of identity?

# Abstract

My work strives to reorient my gaze away from outward definitions of identity toward the complexities and nuances of experiencing the intersections of identity that comprise me and the space of home where I felt most extended. I do not want to essentialize the identifiers of Muslim, Bengali, and Tennessean, nor do I want to neglect the role memory and nostalgia play in shaping home as a place of expansion and ease. Food, cooking, and eating ground both nostalgia and identity in something physical. Through the sense of taste, I reorient myself to the inseparability of experience that cannot be contained by labels.

# On Taste

Our bodies gather information through our senses. Sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste, and balance are the primary modalities of experience. Eurocolonial culture privileges sight, as vision is a sense where the process of perception is distant from the object of perception.<sup>4</sup> Our bodies can see without physically interacting with what we see. Sight requires light, a separating medium, to function, preserving a distance between bodies and that which we perceive.<sup>5</sup> This distance is valued in post-Enlightenment Western culture because it allows for a presumed objectivity. Unlike touch, smell, taste, and, to a lesser ex-

tent, hearing, through sight, bodies do not immediately appear to be entangled with that which we perceive.<sup>6</sup>

Under this logic of distance and objectivity privileged since early modern Western culture, taste is considered a lower sense.<sup>7</sup> Unlike smell, by which microscopic substances reach our nostrils, or touch, where objects interact with the surface of our bodies, taste necessarily implies fully engaging the object of perception into the internal body via the fleshy parts of our mouth. In other words, taste necessarily collapses the distance between body and object, and therefore, objectivity.

Eating follows taste. To taste, one must be vulnerable.

LUMINOUS EATING



Eating is intimate. By eating, you must expose the soft pink of your mouth. By eating, your body accepts the outside, the external, into the cavernous systems of the internal. That which you consume becomes your flesh. Becomes in-corp-orated. Substance alchemizes into the flesh of your being. Between the organs and nerves that comprise you, and the microbiology that inhabits you, food alchemizes into the body. Into being, Into you.

Rice, daal, aloo bharta, kabob  
2023

Colloquially, taste refers to the act of flavor perception. Flavor is inherently synesthetic.<sup>8</sup> Perceiving flavor involves both orthonasal and retronasal smell, taste, mouth-feel, mastication, swallowing, the sound of food between the teeth, the sound of the jaw, and the sight of the food itself. Flavor synthesizes these systems, collapsing even the distinction between senses into a single perception. Flavor perception utilizes an extensive portion of our brains, integrating primal brain functions of the brainstem with the orbitofrontal cortex of our brains where “higher” functions like judgment take place.<sup>9</sup> Flavor involves our entire beings, even though

we perceive flavor as originating in the mouth.

Furthermore, flavor perception physically involves the memory systems of our brain. Smell is unique among the senses because it is directly linked to the brain’s systems for memory and emotion.<sup>10</sup> Retronasal smell comprises much of flavor. The volatile particles from food in our mouths travel from the back of our throats to our olfactory receptors in our nasal cavity as we breathe in.<sup>11</sup> This is why food loses its “taste” with a congested nose. Through the synesthesia of smell and taste, flavor can be seen as a way to physically perceive memory.



Eating is a process of alchemy, a transmutation essential to life. It is not surprising that in the Sufi tradition of Ibn Arabi, knowledge of God is obtained through tasting: Dhawq.<sup>12</sup> Knowledge of the divine cannot be rationally explained or derived, nor can it be transmitted to another being. It can only be experienced directly, in all its sensorial complexities. The divine is only experienced, in whole, tasted with a flavor unique as the individual who does the tasting. There is no recipe for the divine, there is only taste. Sensory perception experienced. A taste that leads to a thirst that may guide a seeker mad until that thirst is quenched.

LUMINOUS EATING



A meal from the family album  
1994

Taste involves an ecosystem of objects, actions, and relationships that aid with eventual internalization. This ecosystem includes the kitchen, cooking, meals, the tools for food preparation, the implements of the table, and of course, the act of eating. The ecosystem surrounding the human need to eat complicates the subjective and individual experience of taste. As Steffan Igro Ayora-Diaz writes, taste entangles “everyday politics of gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, regionalism, and other forms of cultural (self)representation,” and is shaped by negotiations between individuals and communities through time.<sup>13</sup> In this way, taste also internalizes one’s cultural milieu into one’s being. Taste is a sense contingent on context but it is also subjectively experienced.

LUMINOUS EATING



# On Cooking

Anthropologist David Sutton writes about cooking as a skill. According to Sutton, the hallmark of true skill is that it is improvisational and adaptable, not re-creatable through instruction alone. Even written recipes act more as memory jogs rather than prescriptive instructions, as many recipes rely upon a basic understanding of the tools used in food preparation.<sup>14</sup> Cooking works similarly to flavor in that neither can be easily articulated without prior knowledge of embodied gestures and senses.

Yet taste, recipes, and the knowledge to prepare the food they prescribe are so often passed down through generations of women in the context of the kitchen. Both of my grandmothers made *mishtis*. “*Mishti*” is the word for “sweet” in Bangla, and is the general term used for desserts. The most famous desserts of Bengal are milk-based, and the *mishtis* my grandmothers, and later my mother, prepare are made by separating milk curd from whey with an acid. *Roshogolla*, *roshomolai*, and *shondesh* are made this way.

Plain Shondesh, Nolen  
Gurer Shondesh, and raw  
Kalojaam mishtis

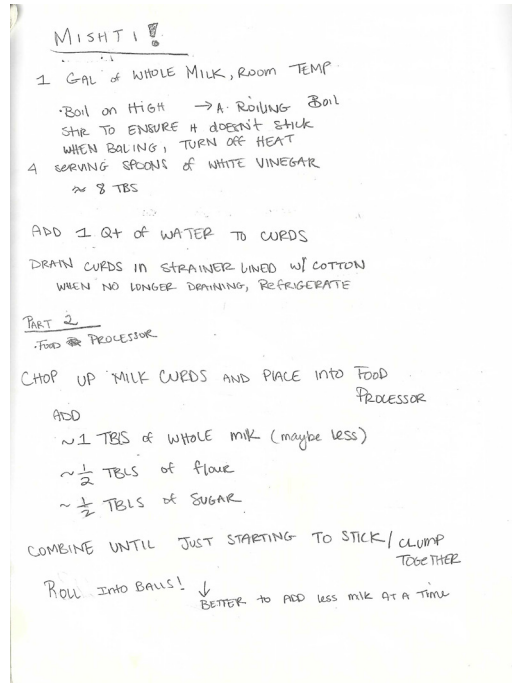
# Roshogolla

Whole Milk  
Vinegar  
Sugar

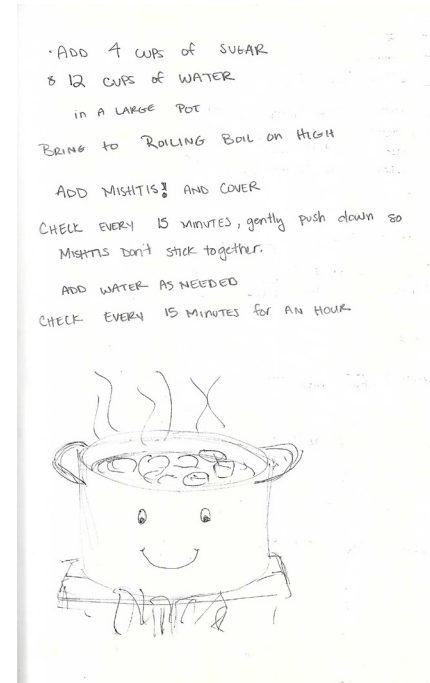




My mother would not tell me her recipe for *roshogolla*, the sweet, milk-based Bengali sweet she learned with my paternal grandmother. My mother wanted to prepare the *roshogolla* with me so she could show me the exact process. Her recipe could not be precisely measured in a way that she could translate onto paper. I had to see and feel the size of the spoon she used to pour vinegar into hot but not quite boiling milk. I had to listen to the sound of the food processor to understand when the drained milk curds were thoroughly kneaded. I had to feel the wetness of the curd to understand if and when I should add flour. I had to taste the sweetness of the syrup and feel its stickiness between my fingers to understand the appropriate consistency because she measures the water level based on the size of the particular pot she uses. As I boiled the plump round curds in the syrup, I had to diligently check the water level to ensure the finished product would not be too sweet. My mother could not express all of these intricacies



if she shared this recipe via the phone or a written recipe. Her decisions for what spoon or pot she used guided her through the recipe as she was cooking. I still reference these same tools when



I cook this sweet in my own kitchen.

These *mishtis* contain my mother's instructions which contain my grandmother's instructions. In fact, Dadu, my paternal grandmother, was the first



to sample and critique my first batch of *roshogolla* (she said it was a little overdone.) Eating these *mishtis* also brings me back to the past occurrences when I have eaten or helped prepare this treat. When forming the round balls of curd, for example, I'm sometimes taken to when I was a toddler helping Nanu, my maternal grandmother, make a batch. Or when my sisters and I were older, helping our mother roll the curd on our little brother's spiderman vinyl table mats so we wouldn't make a mess.

In other words, these *mishtis* entangle my mother and grandmother's methods of making with my own memories generated through the physical act of making the sweet, the tools with

which I remember making the sweets, the spaces where I remember the sweet, and the taste and scent of the sweet itself. These are personal and familial legacies contained in the *mishtis* that I recall and re-inscribe by cooking myself. They are internal, formed by my direct experience.

*Mishtis*, especially the milk-based *shondesh*, are considered a quintessentially Bengali food. The fact most Bengali *mishtis* are prepared from separated milk makes them distinct from even other milk-based Indian sweets.<sup>15</sup> Yet this Bengali dessert can be traced back to Portuguese traders in 15th century Bengal, who brought the technique of cheese-making into the region. Because of the specific socio-political conditions of the Bengal region among many other factors, Bengalis transformed this method into *mishtis* like *shondesh*. *Shondesh*, a Bengali dessert with roots in Portugal contains within its milky sweet morsel a deep history of trade, encounter, and conquest laced also with personal memories of family, home, and place.

Roshogolla Recipe  
written as I cooked with  
my mother  
2021

Preparing mishti  
with Dadu  
family album  
1997



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# On Tools

Sutton writes that skill extends the mind/body through the use of tools.<sup>16</sup>

The tool is not just a mechanical adjunct of the mind but rather extends the body into the environment. Fabio Parasecoli asserts that “objects do things.”<sup>17</sup> Kitchen tools offer the possibility of action by evoking gestures we have performed in the past or observed others perform. Tools invite the acquisition of skill.

Parasecoli writes about the *chitarra* in his mother’s kitchen, and how its presence beckons him to learn the specific type of fresh spaghetti that his grandmother would make with that same tool.<sup>18</sup>

Through its very presence in his mother’s kitchen, the *chitarra* invites interaction, not only with itself as an object, but with his mother who knows how to use the tool. By evoking past gestures, family memories, and meals, the *chitarra* invites new memories to be made.

Kitchen tools carry family histories and multiple layered stories.<sup>19</sup> My mother’s kitchen tools have a history of their own. I’m drawn to the fact that many of her pots, pans, cooking spoons, mixing bowls, and tableware were either purchased or gifted early in my parent’s marriage, and therefore have been a staple fixture in my family’s kitchen and my memory of meals shared in that home. The design elements of these wares, as much as the foods eaten from them, have in turn morphed into the feeling of comfort and expansion of home.

LUMINOUS EATING



Corelle Black Orchid  
Dinner Plate

First Iftar,  
2022



When I first happened upon a Corelle brand plate with the Black Orchid pattern online, I felt a shock of recognition. I knew the graphic art deco black and green flowers and leaves from the 1990s-era tableware in my bones because ever since I could remember, my family ate from the same set of dishes. These plates are present in the old family photos and videos and recent pictures on my phone. They are so entangled with my memories of my mother's care, the warmth of meals, and the kitchen as a space of participation. For me, the Corelle Black Orchid pattern is the pattern of home.

LUMINOUS EATING

*Looming Large*  
Soapstone  
2023





## LUMINOUS EATING

### *Looming Large*

Soapstone

2023

This pattern looms large in my memory. I carved each element of this graphic pattern into a small soapstone dish. When I arrange this set of small dishes together in a large circle, I can transform any surface into a black or-

chid corelle plate. Through this pattern, I can extend the feelings of recognition, of security, of home, into a different environment. I can extend the very Corelle Black Orchid plate into my own surroundings.



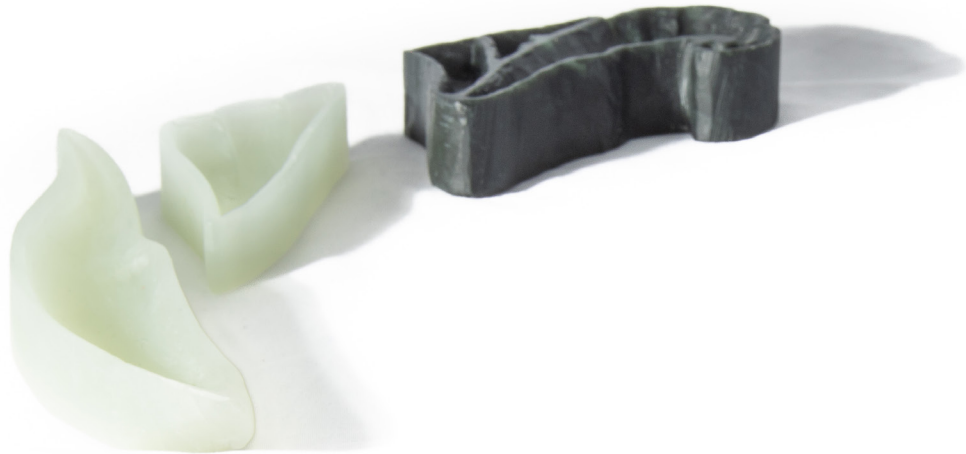


LUMINOUS EATING





*Looming Large (details)*  
Soapstone  
2023





If objects “afford” different possibilities of human use, the environment within which these objects live are not problems to which humans must adapt. Rather, objects constitute part of the total field of possible activity.<sup>20</sup> The space of my kitchen, the tools and technologies within it, its layout, decor, and scents all constitute the very real field of activity my body exists within when I cook. The built environment of my childhood kitchen and the objects within it, as well as my memories of my mother’s food, the way she moves about the kitchen, her relationship with spic-

es, and her relationship to food, preparing meals, and eating all re-emerge through my experience of cooking.

If kitchen tools can extend possibilities, then carving my own shondesh molds propelled my *mishiti*-making. I carved one simple mold that initiated my experiments with making shondesh in my kitchen. The tool activated the possibility to practice cooking this treat, which in turn served as a mnemonic device that brought forth my memories of this dessert.



My first *shondesh* mold  
Soapstone  
2023

Yet for me to truly grapple with the entanglements this *mishti* contains in relationship with myself, I needed to first remove this *shondesh* mold from my domestic space, and by extension, my lived experience. I needed to reframe this mold as an embodied object that would allow me to understand my own relationship with *shondesh* and the cultural meanings it holds for me, rather than just a kitchen tool for making a dessert.

I carved a set of *shondesh* molds from soapstone. Soapstone is the softest of stones, typically only one on the Mohs scale. Though it is a receptive, porous, and giving stone, soapstone is also dense and non-reactive. It retains heat and is a safe surface for food. Soapstone is forgiving. Instead of chipping away, I must only dig into the stone with wood carving tools to give it depth. The resulting residue is literally talcum powder.

By digging into stone to create a mold, I am reminded that what I perceive as lithified, stable, and opaque can even give way to repetition. The very carving tools that extend my body into the stone remind me that the stone itself does not have to remain solid. These soapstone pieces, most of which are mined in India or Brazil, allow me to carve away its matter. It guides my moves, sometimes breaking away where an internal fracture sits unnoticed.

## LUMINOUS EATING



# Histories of Arrival

Sarah Ahmed writes, “homes are effects of the histories of arrival.”<sup>21</sup> Home implies these histories. I write nostalgically of home, of a space and place I felt fully extended, a place where I not so much thought about identity so much as I wasn’t concerned with how whiteness looked at me. Within my home, I understood identity as the way I fit within my own world, a world sheltered in a large family, secluded as homeschooled, in a rural place.

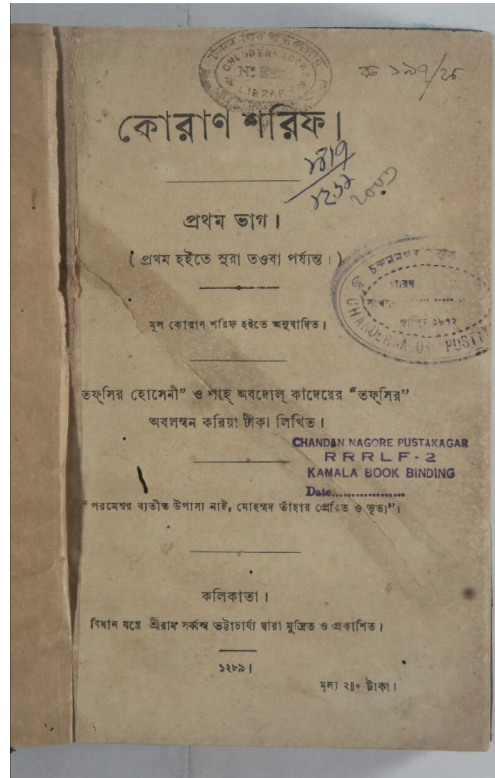
But hierarchies of identity existed even in this nostalgic time, disrupting the rosy nostalgia like hidden fractures in stone. Through soapstone molds and the *shondesh* they bid me to make, I try to detangle some of these hierarchies I internalized.

Traditionally, *shondesh* molds include motifs important in Hindu iconography, like the conch shell, as well as elements reflected in the local environment, like the taal fruit, mango, fish, and flowers. Sometimes molds are inscribed with the Sanskrit names of Hindu deities as offerings within household shrines.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the traditional preparation of *shondesh* incorporates both local landscape informed imagery and Hinduism informed imagery. Although Bengal has been a Muslim majority region for the past five centuries, the practice of Islam there has been deeply influenced by the region's unique blend of Hindu mythology and the natural environment, such as the sal and mangrove forests.<sup>23</sup> Tony Stewart demonstrates this infused, regionally specific, Bengali Islam through his translations and analysis of Bengali poems and texts about Sufi saints who were simultaneously

“musulmani” and “hinduani.”<sup>24</sup>

But by the end of the 19th century, at a time when vast, multiethnic empires gave way to nationalism and nation states, and the center of global power resided with European colonizers who hierarchized the world, Islamic reform movements shifted how Islam was conceived of in Bengal.<sup>25</sup> Sufia Uddin writes in her book *Constructing Bangladesh* how Muslim reformers sought to change the way Islam was practiced in Bengal through printed booklets in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These booklets, printed in the vernacular language of Bangla, were designed to guide readers away from the syncretic expressions of Islam towards the “correct” practices of Islam, aligning ritual practices with a Meccan based approach.<sup>26</sup> These widely circulated texts that sought to align Muslim practice in Bengal with the scholarship in Mecca

*Korana Saripha* (Banlga translated  
 Quran)  
 1891  
 Courtesy of the Endangered Archives  
 Program at the British Library



also cemented Bangla as the language of Islam in Bengal at a time when Urdu was becoming the predominant language of Muslims elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>27</sup>

Yet while Islamic prescriptive texts and stories of Sufi saints proliferated in Bangla, the Quran was not translated from Arabic into Bangla until the 1880's by a Hindu philosopher Girish Chandra Sen of Calcutta.<sup>28</sup> Longstanding debates about whether Bangla, a Sanskrit based language, was pure enough to hold the translation of the Quran delayed access to the holy book of Islam to Bengalis who could not understand Arabic, Persian, or Urdu.<sup>29</sup> All the same, because Bangla was spoken by such a large number of Muslims in South Asia, and the only way to reach this community was through their vernacular language, Bangla was further sedimented as the everyday religious language of the region.

Still, the question of appropriate “Muslimness” of Bangla as a language and Bengalis as a people festered in the politics of a post-partition East and West Pakistan until finally, in 1971, Bangladesh declared its independence.<sup>30</sup>

I cannot speak or understand Bangla very well. Although I was fluent as a small child, I lost my ability to proficiently speak and understand by the age of five. Around that same age, I did learn how to read and later write, Arabic so that I could recite and memorize the Quran, as many Muslims do, even though nobody in my family could speak or understand Arabic. Growing up, my family actively inscribed Islam in me, my siblings, and my cousins. We learned Arabic so that we could read the Quran; we learned and practiced the rituals of prayer every day as a family; we actively read and re-read the story of Muhammad and hadith literature together. Islam was both actively practiced and taught within my family.

Our Bengali heritage was never inscribed in the same way. I did not learn how to read Bangla script, and my knowledge of Bengali history only opened once I began university. I think for my parents, their siblings and inlaws, and all of the older generations of family members, being Bengali was taken for granted. It was just an inextricable part of life that infused the milieu of home. Bengaliness is evidenced by the language, idioms, accents, gestures, clothing, smells, and foods. It is the color of our skin, our genetics. It is as though these elements are meant to be absorbed through proximity, osmosis, and ingestion, but not actively inscribed. Rather, by eating Bengali food every night, I have developed a taste for it and a warm memory associated with it, alighting a desire to learn these recipes so that I may never lose that taste when I move away from a Bangla milieu.

Through this difference in transmission, inscription, and absorption, I perceived a subtle hierarchy between being Muslim and being Bengali, as though to be properly Muslim, I must give up culture, and vice versa. For example, while we always attended Eid festivities with the larger Muslim community in Nashville, we never attended *Pohela Boishakh* or Bangladesh independence day functions.

By learning the histories of Bengal, Islamic reform movements, and the role of language in Bengali Muslim identity, I can better untangle the perception of hierarchy I felt within my home to de-lithify my memory of home. For me, realizing the inseparability of history from my own experience, and therefore my own identity, helps me acknowledge the depth I lost through nostalgia and makes the identifiers of Bengali and Muslim less defined and more fluid.

LUMINOUS EATING

Amulet (left)

Nephrite Jade

2009

Courtesy of the V&A Museum

Amulet (right)

Nephrite Jade

2023

Courtesy of Bonhams



# Inscribing

The Mughals, who established power in the Indian subcontinent in 1526 and conquered the Bengal Sultanate in 1576, also carved into stone.<sup>31</sup> They carved marble, sandstone, emerald, spinel, jade, and more. Many precious and semi-precious stones were inscribed with Quranic verses in Arabic. These talismans could offer the wearer protection through the very physical presence of the text itself. I carve my soapstone *shondesh* molds into the shape of many of these talismans.

LUMINOUS EATING





"আমার প্ৰভু! আমার বুক আমার জন্ম প্ৰসারতি করো,  
"আর আমার কাজ আমার জন্ম সহজ করে দাও,  
"আর আমার জিহ্বা থেকে জড়তা তুমি খুলে দাও,  
"যনে তারা আমার বক্তব্য বুঝতে পারে।

He said,

"My Lord! Expand for me my breast  
Make my task easy for me  
and untie a knot from my tongue  
so they may understand my speech!

Quran 20: 25-28

*Untie the Knot From My Tongue*  
Soapstone, cotton cord, saree fabric  
2022

LUMINOUS EATING



*Untie the Knot From My Tongue (detail)*

Soapstone, cotton cord, saree fabric

2022



*Untie the Knot From My Tongue (detail)*  
Soapstone, cotton cord, saree fabric  
2022

LUMINOUS EATING



*Untie the Knot From My Tongue (detail)*

Soapstone, cotton cord, saree fabric

2022



*Untie the Knot From My Tongue (detail)*

Soapstone, cotton cord, saree fabric

2022

LUMINOUS EATING



*Untie the Knot From My Tongue (detail)*

Soapstone, cotton cord, saree fabric

2022

I habitually say these verses in Arabic before a discussion or presentation as a prayer to communicate clearly. How do I begin to communicate the expansive feeling of my home when I feel limited by the labels that are supposed to correspond to that experience? How do I acknowledge my inseparability from the histories carried with my family and within the place I call home? Sara Ahmed writes, “home as over flowing and flowing over.”<sup>32</sup> One feels extended when one is at home.

LUMINOUS EATING



*Untie the Knot From My Tongue*  
Soapstone, cotton cord, saree fabric  
2022



The prayer “expand for me my chest” implies that the supplicant feels a sense of constriction. A tightness in the chest, a heaviness of the heart that constrains, or that squeezes the ability to articulate. These verses are a prayer for expansion, clarity, and receptivity. This prayer is a plea for that feeling of extension.

I know these verses in Arabic and in English. But in the process of inscribing the Bangla translation of these verses into the soapstone molds, I had to trace and retrace letters I did not know that correspond to sounds that my tongue and ears are familiar with. In the process of carving the prayer, I am learning Bangla through the Quran.

This act of carving Bangla text becomes a reciprocal act, a production that is re-embodied. This action of carving reciprocates by teaching me the language. Carving is an act of learning that allows me to re-remember. Bangla as a language, Bangla as the Quran, and Bangla as an expression of my own Muslimness. Carving the verses I am so familiar with in a language that is familiar yet not well known to me becomes reciprocal. By carving in Bangla, I am untangling the knot on my tongue by learning, practicing, and inscribing the Bangla letters. In the act of carving, I am answering the prayer.

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সুতরাং তোমরা আমাকে স্মরণ কর,  
আমিও তোমাদের স্মরণ  
রাখবো

“So Remember Me,  
I will Remember You.”

Quran 2: 152

*I'm Remembering*  
Soapstone, cotton cord, saree fabric  
2022

LUMINOUS EATING



*I'm Remembering (detail)*

Soapstone, cotton cord, saree fabric  
2022



*I'm Remembering (detail)*  
Soapstone, cotton cord, saree fabric  
2022

LUMINOUS EATING



*I'm Remembering (detail)*

Soapstone, cotton cord, saree fabric  
2022

The act of remembrance itself is reciprocal. To remember is to conjure something removed in either time or space, something out of reach, into the present moment. Remembering makes that which is being remembered immanent. The Quran verse above highlights the reciprocal relationship inherent in remembering the divine, that in the very act of remembering the divine, the divine remembers you back.

LUMINOUS EATING



*I'm Remembering*  
Soapstone, cotton cord, saree fabric  
2022



I carved this verse into a second set of soapstone *shondesh* molds. This verse, too, I translated into Bangla, learning the letters and the sounds they hold, new yet familiar, as I carved them into the stone. The reciprocal nature of the verse feels more intimate to me in Bangla than Arabic somehow since these Bangla words are ones I already understand. I receive another layer of meaning through that translation.

This sense of reciprocity, that doing conjures meaning, is something that feels deeply connected to food and cooking. It is present in the question that encircles this work, and many of the foods I choose to eat generally: if I cook and eat Bengali food, will I become more Bengali? Is it possible to reinforce a Bengali identity through eating and food preparation without essentializing that identity, and therefore protect this heritage from loss as time moves on?

LUMINOUS EATING



Family jainamaz (Prayer Rug)  
2017

# Orientations

Looking back on the past, it is as though my family was oriented more towards Mecca than Dhaka, all while sedimenting our presence in Tennessee. This, in turn, translated into my emotional affinity with the broader “Muslim world” over any other community outside of my family, imagined or otherwise. In a way, even my decision to center Quranic verses on these molds reflects this orientation in my own life.

But, like the transformation of Islamic practice in Bengal in the 19th and 20th centuries, the concept of “the Muslim world” is a product of Islamic

reform movements, European colonialism, and the shift from empires to nation states.<sup>33</sup> In *The Idea of the Muslim World*, Cemil Aydin explains that the concept of a global Muslim World with shared characteristics developed as a response to European colonialism and imperialism in the late 18th century.<sup>34</sup> Muslims living in European empires that stratified the humanity of their subjects appealed European claims of their inferiority by demonstrating their humanity by way of highlighting that Muslims in fact come from a shared and advanced civilization.<sup>35</sup> In other words, “the Muslim world” is a negative identity, one founded in proving worth to the other who does not accept your full humanity. “The Muslim World” is outside-facing, oriented towards the Euro-colonial world.

LUMINOUS EATING



Tullahoma, TN Jumah  
Family album  
2006

Is the constriction and lithification I feel in the act of labeling myself with the identities I hold—Bengali, Muslim, American, Tennessean—also a plea for validation from the Other, the external-facing world, or the white-dominated society that surrounds home? Does this need to perform identity emerge in me because I feel I must validate myself to what these terms mean externally outside my personal experience? Conforming myself to outside definitions, not to the realities that emerge within my internal space? Can I engage these questions through making *shondesh*?

These labels of identity that mark place, ethnicity, or even religion are in so many ways happenstance. What control do we even have over our backgrounds? They absolutely inform our personal experiences, but identity is also never stable. The way my grandparents understand Bengal emerges from the slice of time in which they grew up. Bangladesh as a country has changed over the years, but it is my grandparents' and parents' memories of Bengal that remain with me and form my notion of Bengalingness. In other words, within the space of my home, the flux inherent in diasporic identity is immersive and inescapable. The contingencies are ever-present. But adhering a label lithifies that shifting and emerging experience into something defined and solid, making those contingencies opaque.

## LUMINOUS EATING

At the very least, by making *shondesh*, I feel connected to my grandmothers, as I learned the basics of the recipe through them. My Nanu's *sharee* ties the shondesh molds together into two necklaces.<sup>36</sup> Nanu wore vividly colored *sharees* effortlessly every day for most of her life. She rejoices whenever I or any of her granddaughters wear one. *Sharees*, as a garment that contains a ritual in draping eighteen feet of fabric upon the body, is yet another matrilineal legacy. When I asked if she had any old *sharees*, Nanu happily let me have a bright turquoise *sharee* she hadn't worn in years. It still smelled like her, and the numerous stains throughout the garment told me she had cooked with this *sharee*.





*I'm Remembering (detail)*  
Soapstone, cotton cord, saree fabric  
2022

LUMINOUS EATING





# Molding

Sutton writes that cooking sits between production and consumption.<sup>37</sup> The embodied tasks carried out and the transformation that occurs through cooking all contribute to an edible end result that is meant to be consumed. Internalized. Ingested. To be successful, the result of cooking must inevitably disappear. Yet the effects of cooking remain legible within the tools and smells and residues that remain.

## LUMINOUS EATING

The necklace sits on my chest, conforming to the softness of my body. Like cooking, jewelry inhabits an in-between space. Jewelry enfolds the body without becoming it. Jewelry can encircle a wrist, embrace a chest, or even pierce through an ear, but it is never fully internalized. Until the stone molds of my necklaces are used, they are not activated. The verses inscribed in each mold are not even legible. All of the text is mirrored, hinting that, as a necklace, the mold itself is incomplete. To be legible, something must be impressed into the stone. Like cooking, this necklace sits between production and consumption.

Unless I make *mishti* these necklaces will remain unactivated,  
their potential not yet realized.



*Shondesh, Kon Desh*

Performance Still

Soapstone, cotton cord,  
saree, cotton, shondesh

2022

So I make *shondesh*. I emphasize my own contingency in making my *mishti* by becoming part of the environment wherein I make. Through a flowy garment of white cotton voile, the most accessible fabric I imagine the lost art of Dhakai muslin to resemble, I am draped over the kitchen table. This cotton garment is the tablecloth, and I become embedded within the kitchen.

## LUMINOUS EATING

Covered in this garment that extends me from the dining table, I wear the necklace. I scoop a chunk of shondesh, soften it in my hands, and press it against my chest, into the stone molds of my necklace. I press against my chest, a gesture of depth, of pain, of closeness, a gesture to understand my own brown body, my own Bengaliness, my own Muslimness. This act of molding against my chest is my prayer for “an expanded heart,” for “an untied tongue.” It is an embrace of the women who have given me so much, and a recognition of my inseparability from all of the which I come from.

*Shondesh, Kon Desh*  
Performance Still  
Soapstone, cotton cord,  
saree, cotton, shondesh  
2022







*Shondesh, Kon Desh*

Performance Still

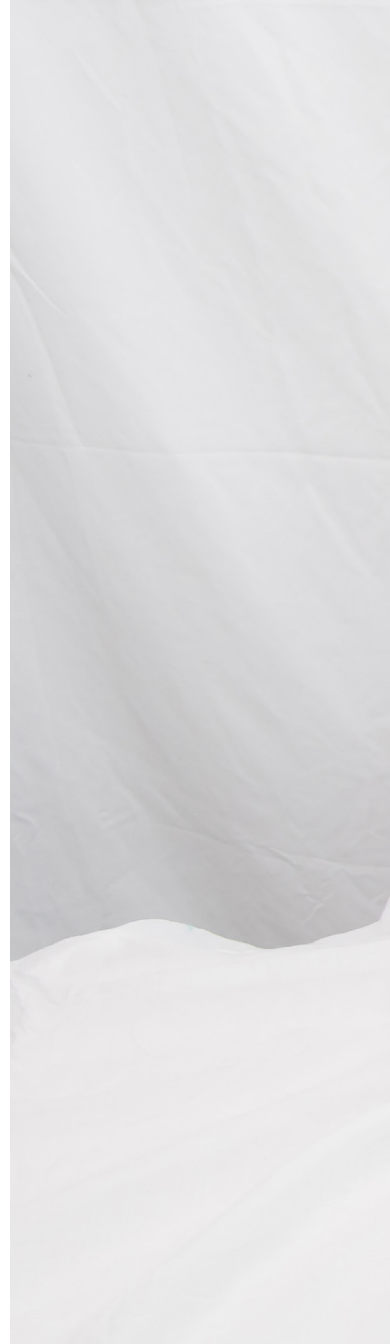
Soapstone, cotton cord,  
saree, cotton, shondesh

2022

With each pressing, I also relax. With a carved tool, I release the morsel of shondesh from its mold and place it on a plate. As the plate fills, the entirety of the verses becomes legible, but in the form of food. In the form of a quint-essentially Bengali dessert that contains the complex histories of encounter and land and my own family and identity in one sugary sweet bite.

LUMINOUS EATING

*Shondesh, Kon Desh*  
Performance Still  
Soapstone, cotton cord,  
saree, cotton, shondesh  
2022





## LUMINOUS EATING

Ultimately, the necklaces are the means for something temporal. The necklaces and the ritual of molding beckon me to remember that I am remembering. The necklace sits upon my body. The garment sits upon my body. The labels I struggle to understand my relationship with, Bengali, Muslim, Tennessean, etc., also sit upon my body.

*Shondesh, Kon Desh*  
Performance Still  
Soapstone, cotton cord,  
saree, cotton, shondesh  
2022



LUMINOUS EATING



Plain Shondesh, Nolen  
Gurer Shondesh, and raw  
Kalojaam mishtis

But the molded shondesh is meant to be eaten. It is supposed to be tasted. It asks to be sunk between one's teeth, activating the sweet and slightly tart taste buds on the tongue, coating our mouths with its fattiness, only to be swallowed a moment later. Maybe for some, that taste also activates memory and nostalgia; for others, it is a new experience; still for others, an unpleasant one. But in every case, shondesh is made to be ingested. Digested until its nutrients become you. Masticated so that the prayer embossed inheres into your very body. Internalized so that its history remains physically with you. And yet eventually, what is left will be expelled.

LUMINOUS EATING





*Over Flowing and Flowing Over, Looming Large*  
Marble, soapstone, shondesh  
2023

LUMINOUS EATING



# Flowing Over

I chafe against the labels of identity and their relationship to the politics of representation. In many ways, the way I perceive labels of identity is akin to a mold, a hard, resistant, sturdy fixture against which I must conform. It is not the actual labels of identity, per se, that bother me but rather the way I feel essentialized by that label in a society that seems to value outer markers of representation over true depth of experience. To expand the feeling of home, I must “over flow and flow over.”<sup>38</sup>

With the weight of a carved marble plate where the pattern from the Corelle Black Orchid is pierced away, I extrude *shondesh* from beneath the plate. It fills and overflows the negative spaces cut into the marble, extending beyond even my pattern of home.

*Over Flowing and Flowing Over*  
Marble  
2023

LUMINOUS EATING



*Over Flowing and Flowing Over*  
Marble, shondesh  
2023



LUMINOUS EATING

*Over Flowing and Flowing Over*

Marble

2023



Against the mold, I can soften and release. I can extend beyond the nostalgia that tints the safety and security of the spaces and ideas I feel at ease within. I remind myself that only through the synesthesia that is taste can I grasp both my wholeness and inseparability.

LUMINOUS EATING

*Over Flowing and Flowing Over, Looming Large*  
Marble, soapstone, shondesh  
2023





# Endnotes

- 1 Gregorio Zlotnik and Aaron Vansintjan, "Memory: An Extended Definition," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (November 7, 2019): 2523, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02523>, 2.
- 2 Ibid, 2.
- 3 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2002), xiii.
- 4 Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 3.
- 5 Ibid, 20.
- 6 Ibid, 12.
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- 8 Gordon M. Shepherd, *Neurogastronomy: How the Brain Creates Flavor and Why It Matters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 155.
- 9 Ibid, 157.
- 10 Ibid, 158.
- 11 Ibid, 29.
- 12 William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge Ibn Al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1989), 220.
- 13 Steffan Igor Ayora-Diaz, *The Cultural Politics of Food, Taste, and Identity: A Global Perspective* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 9.
- 14 David Sutton, "Cooking Skills, the Senses, and Memory: The Fate of Practical Knowledge," in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, eds. Carole Counihan, Penny Van Esterik, and Alice Julier (Routledge, 2018), 299-319, 310.
- 15 Colleen Taylor Sen. "The Portuguese Influence on Bengali Cuisine." In *Food on the Move: Proceedings from the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 1996*, ed. Harlan Walker, (England: Prospect Books, 1997) 288-29, 292.
- 16 Sutton, "Cooking Skills, the Senses, and Memory: The Fate of Practical Knowledge." 302.

- 17 Fabio Parasecolli. "Brittle Memories: Sharing Culinary Expertise in an Italian Family" In *Food in Memory and Imagination: Space, Place, and Taste*, eds. Beth M. Forrest and Greg de St. Maurice, (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2022), 81-91, 86.
- 18 Ibid, 86.
- 19 Sutton, "Cooking Skills, the Senses, and Memory," 304.
- 20 Ibid, 302.
- 21 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 9.
- 22 Pika Ghosh, *Cooking for the Gods: The Art of Home Ritual in Bengal* (Newark Museum, 1995).
- 23 Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2006), 33-36.
- 24 Tony K. Stewart, *Witness to Marvels: Sufism and Literary Imagination* (Univ of California Press, 2019), xxix.
- 25 Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, 67-75.
- 26 Ibid, 46.
- 27 Ibid, 59.
- 28 Ibid, 82-88.
- 29 Ibid, 72; 79.
- 30 Ibid, 1-4.
- 31 Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (University of California Press, 1996), 137.
- 32 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, II.
- 33 Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World : A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 2.
- 34 Ibid, 49.
- 35 Ibid, 37.
- 36 I deliberately use the word "sharee" instead of "saree" to transliterate the Bangla pronunciation of the word.
- 37 Sutton, "Cooking Skills, the Senses, and Memory," 300.
- 38 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, II.

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LUMINOUS EATING

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