

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

BAY OF BENGAL

Sabrina Islam, Master of Fine Arts, 2017

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In “Bay of Bengal” Radhi returns home after several years. She is on a journey of self-discovery, imposed on her, in part, by her struggle with her work as a journalist. Each of the characters in this world are limited in some way. How do we manage to live fully in the presence of our individual, unique limitations of being human? A grandmother, incapable of not spreading gossip, is also capable of keeping a family secret from her vulnerable granddaughter. A mother who sends herself to exile to prove her anger, is also capable of unending love. Radhi, while capable of taking steps outside of her nature, is at times incapacitated by the limits of language. There are also moments of recollecting the past, admitting to the force of imagination, and acknowledging the power of youthful vulnerability. Though most of all, this is a story about a return to the heart.

BAY OF BENGAL

by

Sabrina Islam

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Dedication

For Tanjila.

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This is my mother's home. She grew up in these corridors, singing late into the night. I run down the mosaic stairs, past the iron gates and into the gardens. My hair flows behind me. The electricity is out. The sky is ruby. The crows are calling. It may be morning. It may be dusk. The gardens are flooded. The plumerias peek through the bushes, pulling themselves out of the water. I tell my dreams to my friends. They come from around, they are my neighbors, they are young like me. I hear their dreams. We walk through the water, picking hibiscuses. I see a water lily float through the gates, into our home, past my friend, Khea, who is a goat. Khea looks at the flower, and then me. Her legs deep in the floodwater. Why do we ask for permission when we have already made up our minds? Khea engulfs the flower. The shoots protruding out of her mouth, the bare leaf floating away from the house. I hear my mother call me to come inside. I get a fever.

I ask for new books when my mother says to read hers. I want to write my own notes. Mark the pages the way my heart desires. When I am fourteen, my mother gets me a larger bookshelf. The carpenters make the teak case inside my room, fitting it to the size of a wall. There is no way to take the case out without undoing it. They seal the books here. They say teak will protect them. My books smell of wood.

One should not fall in love when too young. It drips into your soul.

Hometown

My parents greet me at the airport. My mother takes me in a strong hug and places a kiss on my shoulder. My father takes my arm. He doesn't let go as I walk with him while he fumbles with the luggage. My mother asks if the journey was safe. Suddenly my skin is alight, my body alert of itself. I am aware I am in Bangladesh.

My thin shirt is no match to the heat at the airport. A foreigner in my own skin. Seeing me restless, my mother insists we get out immediately.

We return to my childhood home, my grandmother's home, in Dhaka. It has been a while since I've been here but everything looks the same as it did when I was here the last time. In the afternoon I find myself in my parent's room. Our family albums are lined up on a shelf. I take out five and gently place them on the bed. The bindings feel weak. Flipping through each, I eventually find the photos from a trip to Cox's Bazar we took years ago. There are about fifteen pictures. I think I was expecting to be hit by some memory. Hoping that something would be illuminated seeing these pictures. I begin to peel the thin, invisible plastic protecting the photos. I slow down when a photo attaches itself to the plastic and bits of the picture get stuck to the thin lining. I hear my mother's voice and hide the photos, closing the brown, tattering album. You are looking at the albums, my mother says, excitedly, and sits to join me. She picks up a red one that appears it might just fall into pieces in the next minute. These are the photos from my wedding, she says. I have seen these so many times, I tell her. Yes, I know, my mother replies. And see, here, look at you—a child, she says. The air in the room feels hot. I gently touch the cover of the brown album and wait for her to give up and leave. But she doesn't and after almost an hour, we put

back the collections on the shelf. I pick up the photos I managed to steal from under the bed before I leave.

At dinner my mother asks about my work. I ask her about the bread pudding. Where did you get the recipe? She asks about Deba. When is she coming, your colleague?

Saturday. I was wondering, I think I'll go to Cox's Bazaar until she arrives.

Aren't you going to spend any time with us?

My father looks up from his plate.

Yes, of course, I say. But, perhaps, on Wednesday, I'll take the car to Cox's Bazaar.

So we get you for two days, Radhi? My mother asks.

With my hand I pick on my piece of chicken.

We can spend time when I'm back, I say.

My father stops eating. He hijacks the conversation.

Is it safe for you to be here?

Why wouldn't it be? I am expected to be here — I'm a journalist.

Did you have trouble at the airport?

Of course not, my voice curt.

Don't be so sure. You know how it is here, now, for journalists.

It's not the same. Besides, I'll be careful.

When will you be back?

I'll be back by the time Deba is here.

And you'll stay here? My mother asks.

I've already told you, yes.

I walk down our street after dinner. My parents are in the garden. I can hear their laughter as I close the gate behind me. My father probably told her about something that happened at work. Like other marriages, my parents' years together survived all kinds of heartaches.

On one side of the street I see the concrete houses, on the other, the slums. I think about the concrete houses. I think about my childhood, protected in these great walls and I think about my garden. What did we talk about? What did we do? I look from veranda to veranda, trying to see past the nightlights and the muted paints.

There is a girl standing in a veranda. She is fourteen, fifteen. The veranda is part of a kitchen. The burned pots and pans hang on the wall behind her. Her hands are holding the iron, her eyes rove the slums. Her head occasionally pauses while she observes nighttime affairs. Her eyes, her face, mesh into one. It is almost like gazing upon the brilliant stars at night and seeing a frameless pattern of uncertainty and glory. And like the sky, the hidden meaning of her world resides in the wonders of the infinite cosmos behind.

The day falls into famous sleep. Desire wakes. The echoes of the heart, heard. Suitors kiss their women goodnight. Books crack open under bright lamps. The sound of TVs, late night news, and the clatter of plates: I hear them all. The uneven bricks on the pavements. Monopoly fights. Fresh cups of tea arrive. I ask my mother if I could come inside. I ask her if she would come outside. The full moon. Dusty trees surround us. All this burnt and left behind. But this gesture, down this street, celebrates untold roots. My grandmother asks us to come together, tea and hot crepes are served. Her face exuberant with news. We bought two graves, she says. One for your grandfather and one for me.

In my room, I leave the lights turned off and pull out the brown album and find the empty pages. I peel out the rest of the photos and examine them in the dark. Their foreignness remains. I spend the night looking at the pictures and writing down my own interpretation of them in a notebook. I see one where I am wearing a red and blue cotton dress. My hair is tied into a bun. I am standing close to the water, my forehead wrinkled, possibly bothered by the sunlight. Maybe even bothered by the water. I write down all the likely reasons I might be bothered. I need to feel bothered again when I get there, when I get to Cox's Bazaar. Slouching on my bed in the humid air of the night, I hear the noise nocturnal animals make while I scribble the possibilities. In the next picture I am on an island. We are in Daruchini Dip. Over the years, my mother has repeated how vivid this island is. In the grainy picture I see my mother whose expression is more lost than present. And I wonder how she could remember its vividness if she is so lost. I write down my observation. Next to it I add, "it's just a picture — a moment."

Ask good questions if you want good answers. I sit down in my room to work. I write questions, one after the other. The page fills. I cross out the ones that seem too easy. I add. Put together questions that could belong to each other. Mix and match. The puzzling boundaries. Edit. I have a concrete list, at last.

I haven't worked on this table for years. I did my homework on this desk. Hours of concentration, memorizing poetry. Reciting them aloud, forgetting them. Learning new words. Forming sentences late into the night as I walk on this garden, my garden. I see it outside, through my window. My fingers mark with pencil lead. I read a line, borrow two, find a third. I have always been drawn to words. In the way

unfitting words come together and belong, so fully, their existence before meeting almost perishes. One word follows the next, building becomes routine. Words assemble themselves as one has heard all their lives, and then, they belong to something else — just this particular thought, representing some imagination, kaleidoscope or other.

New Market in August

Bur-flowers force their way out of the tough leaves. Their whole existence intensely contrasting the impossible rain. They scatter on the broken pavements, waiting to be trampled over. We are in New Market, gliding past people, allowing ourselves to be periodically carried by the crowd. We align our bodies and set sail with the waves. Passing by rushing ladies as they pick up anything their eyes catch. Turning the objects in their hands, the excitement in their dark eyes quickly replaced with disdain, and just as fast, they leave the object where they found it with a “hmm.” My eyes are on the vendor standing behind the cart, already moving on to the next customer who reaches her hand just as enthusiastically as did the woman before her. Time is as limited as space. This place must feel cold at night. The gates pulled down. The stores locked away. The vendors walking or taking the bus home. Too late, their children asleep. And again, too early for them to meet in the morning. Gone again to the bustling stands, bantering with the vendor standing next to his cart. Compatriots. He knows more about this man than he would ever know of his own children. He will fight with him for a customer. The customer confused, but relatively sure she needs these bangles, will ultimately buy the pair. Now, he shares the money with the vendor in the next stand. There are no expectations. There is nowhere else to go. There is just

this life, vibrantly alive. Here, the week ahead is all one can care for, really. The mothers throwing buckets of water on the children in the community shower before leaving for work. The children going off to school, hopping on the school vans, the doors looked behind them. Their grandparents living outside Dhaka, like my aunts, waiting for them to visit this year, and if not, the next. And if not, the next. Woven in the days, the seasons steadily pass.

The Morning News

To report, to bring news.

I jump off my bed, run past the dining table. My grandmother is sitting there. She calls me. Radhi, eat first, she says. Barefoot, I run down the stairs. The green and yellow mosaic cold on my feet. I grab the newspaper before anyone else gets their hands on them. I dislike the creases and wrinkles on a read-newspaper. I wave at my friends who are headed to my garden. They want me to join them.

Radhi, come over! One of them yells.

Not today! I yell back.

You said that yesterday, she responds, disappointed.

I smile and return upstairs.

I'll eat in an hour, I say, before my grandmother could say anything more.

The smell of fresh newspaper. I read the headline. City faces water crisis. I read down the columns. Another headline. Education minister announces the publication of new mathematics books for primary schools. I hear Khea bleat in the garden.

The newspaper in one hand, I pull the curtain back with my other hand. I rest my back on the armchair. I flip to page fifteen so see how the piece ends. The new mathematics books will better prepare students for secondary school.

I split the paper open. World News. Buzzing in my brain the words settle. Photographs capturing places I have never been. Unclear photographs. Black and white. I add colors to them. Motion to the faces. Spaces beyond the frames. There are new lands growing outside the corners and lives I have not yet known. The nervous fear of where the next sentence might go. Fingers encrusted with dark ink. Passion fueling through my heart. I feel like a swallow on a mountain. I hear a knock on the door. Come in. Here's your tea, aunty, the servant says. Your grandmother sent it. I'll be there soon, I reply. Oil prices go up in Pakistan. Thailand prepares for another tropical storm.

The thud of the paper on our doorstep. It's morning. Today, again, I see where things are broken. I see what is broken.

Nakshi Kathas

When I was young, in the summers, I wandered our villages:

I see women work on nakshi kathas. I see my aunts work on embroideries. They start their work early in the morning. I join them in the afternoon. I walk by the ponds, see familiar faces dip into the shallow waters, women with their saris wrapped around their necks. Their children swimming around them. The green branches lie low. The dogs take careful steps as they stand guard, nails forcing their way into the muddy ground. The scent of summer in the air. Owls hidden from sight. The world, once more, turning its face away from winter. As I walk around the circular pond, the earth rotates, and I speed to the other side, and return again. I walk back again. The loose fans, their motors hanging, turn, and I find myself here. My eyes are young here, those childhood fears return. Uncertainty in the dry air. And without failing, the women rise from the ponds, their children swimming past them, climbing on land. A silver can rolls down the street, aluminum cuts through madness. Lovers return for the sake of lovers.

I hold the large, cotton canvases for my aunts. My aunts don't talk much. They listen. But when they speak they repeat things. It is in their mannerism to repeat things. Villagers come by to see me. They tell me how much I am missed. As I become older I am not only holding the kathas, I begin working on them. When they repeat the same words I sew the same area on the kathas. These areas are the corners. I remember one summer when a villager, Sabiha, would come by. And so, as soon as Sabiha walked through the front door, I moved the large and heavy katha around and I worked on a corner. The embroidery slowly formed shapes, flowers, as I waited for Sabiha to finish narrating what transpired in her life since she last left the place. Other than the humdrum, occasionally there was the surprise entry of Laylaa, her sister, who would pay a visit from her village, and then it would be time for us to hear about Laylaa's life. At some point, it became clear to me when Sabiha was about to introduce a seemingly sudden, yet completely predictable, twist. It was usually her eyes that gave it away. It was usually a visit from Laylaa.

I take out a white nakshi kantha. The cotton is crinkled. The orange lines hold the patterns in a frame. There are hundreds of rose buds surrounding the inside of the orange lines. There's a large jasmine in the center circled by smaller ones and twin rose buds, all of which are held in place by kulas with grains of rice in them. The delicate stitches cover the whole sheet. There is a story in the spaces between the stitches. Or are the stitches the stories? A breath taken between the colored stitches, thinking, where should I go next? The stitches are like my hair. They spread all over the sheet the way my hair is on my head. There are too many stories for me to ever know. So I stitch on,

and switch colors from blue to green and green to yellow. My aunts sit with me. When they finally speak, they sound hurt. They repeat.

Cox's Bazaar

As I drive through the heavy traffic, I look at the passing landscape. The districts appear identical with slight variations. Trees become thinner. I pass through Narayanganj, Comilla, Feni, until I reach Chittagong. I wonder how it might have appeared to me as a child and if it is any different from the backseat. I pull over and sit in the back. My car sits still while trucks speed by. I think how strange it will be when my mother opens the album to discover the pictures are gone.

I left home before dawn to see the sun rise over Dhaka. The traffic then was light. The morning mist palpable in the air. The golden-orange sun bared itself in a clear sky. I hope to use the whole day for my investigation. And then there is Deba who will be here on Saturday. Three days from now. Three full days of taking notes and finding clues that could unveil something, anything, essential from my past. Something that could clarify to me my own life. I look closely at the photos hoping they would reveal that something to me. I did the same when I was in my teenage years. But my memory of anything connected to the place has disappeared. My mother would laugh remembering how funny it was seeing me frightened as I rode a horse along the coast. My father was there to hold me, she said, but that did not help. The horse unexpectedly began to gallop and my father, still holding me, half ran and half sprinted, trying to keep up with us. This brought a final outburst of tears, my mother would say, you couldn't keep it to yourself, the photos still in her hand as her body shook with laughter. I remember none of this. I would like to remember this incident. Or anything about this trip. I am struggling to reopen that part of my mind. And then I hear about how the car broke down on our way. It was towards the end of summer. I sat wrapped in blankets, my father checking what might have been wrong

with the car and my mother making phone calls to see if there was a repair shop near by. You fell asleep by the time the car was fixed, my mother said to me so many times in her room. Thank God we didn't have to take it to a shop, my mother would add. Was I cold in the car? I wanted to ask. How long were we there? Why do I not remember this?

Chittagong bleeds and turns into Cox's Bazaar. I drive down the hilly roads until the land gradually shifts and the town exposes itself. I booked the same hotel I stayed in with my parents over twenty years ago, twenty-five years to be exact, according to my findings. I measure the hotel against a picture from my collection. Here, in this picture I am standing alone in front of the hotel. My eyes squinting, a broad smile on my face. The red and blue cotton dress once again. The exterior of the hotel looks very much like it was when I was here the last time except it has a different hue of blue. Lighter.

About a month ago I called to book my room here. I spoke with the manager to find out if any of their employees from 1991 were still there. We wrote back and forth for a while. He found a bellhop who now works as a concierge at another hotel. After the manager contacted the man, the former bellhop, agreed to talk with me. What is this about exactly? The manager asked me. I'm looking for a missing person, I say.

Entering my room, I think if it is the same one I stayed in all those years ago. Maybe this is a pointless journey. The entirety of the interior could have been changed and I wouldn't know. It's been too many years, I think and regret. I change into a long dress and head out to the beach, my notebook in my purse.

The Bay of Bengal crashes on this beach. The beach that stretches for seventy-four miles. Padma, Jamuna, Meghna: three Bangladeshi rivers, empty into the Bay of Bengal. The waters change their names thrice before they reach here. Before that, the rivers are Brahmaputra in India, and Yarlung Tsangpo River in Tibet. Maybe these waters came from Tibet, and maybe when I touch them, for a lost second, I am in Tibet.

Summer was drawing to a close when I decided to travel to Bangladesh.

Sitting on a towel, I spread out the pictures I assume were taken on this particular spot. Apparently I had been here when I was six or seven. Six. Based on my notes, I was six. I remember things before that age but this particular visit only reminds itself in these photographs. Photographs of me, my mother and my father. There are about five pictures on this coast. Although, I realize, the pictures could have been taken further down, further away from the hotel. I place the sandy towel in my purse and walk along the beach exchanging one photo after another, seeing if any of them match up. Are these waters any different? Have the sands rolled too much? Is there even a single grain where it had been twenty-five years ago? There are more people on the beach now. I see a child riding a horse along the coast. I get closer to the woman holding her, and ask the child if she is enjoying herself. The woman smiles and asks the child to speak to me. I shuffle through my pictures until I find the one where I am riding the horse. I hold it in the air and walk next to the child. The woman has a quizzical expression on her face. I am too exhausted to explain anything to her so I speak to the child instead. The child, either frightened by the horse or perhaps me, begins to cry. That's good, that's good, I say. Louder. I am wishing the horse would speed up. The woman tries to calm the child and no sooner, takes her down and into her arms and walks away without speaking to me again. The boy who

is tending to the horse comes over. I notice that I have completely blocked out his voice. He has been talking all this time, just a few feet away, instructing the woman and the little girl. I would like to ride the horse, I tell him.

I explore the beach and the possible places we stopped, stalls, shops, maybe for a drink of water or to freshen up. The stalls showcase local garments: printed clothing in red, green. The smell of cotton in the air. I talk to the store vendors at the entrance. I show them the pictures. How long have you worked here, ma'am? Do you remember any of these people? It was twenty-five years ago. They were here for three days. The girl here is six. Yes, yes, she's my sister. I need to find her. So can you please try to remember, remember something.

"There isn't much I remember," one woman says. "It was the year of the cyclone."

The 1991 tropical cyclone was a deadly one. Taking 140,000 lives and the homes of 10 million people. On the surface of the ocean it rose and claimed land through the Bay of Bengal, a provider of horrors. Villages wiped away, pulled into the waters. Crops ruined. Hunger and pain became part of the lives in these coastal regions. Why were my parents coming here then? What brought them to the Bay of Bengal at a time like this?

"There isn't much I remember beyond that," she says. "When something like that happens, it takes over your mind. It's all you can remember."

When I return to the hotel the manager immediately approaches me. The concierge is here, madam, he says, pointing to a man in a suit waiting in the lobby.

The man waves at me. Thank you for finding him, I say, grateful. I hope you find the girl, madam, the manager says.

In my room I write my notes in detail. I write how it felt riding the horse across the Bay. I write about the child too and her fears. I imagine what those might be. I write about the setting sun and the heat of the night and how the sand became warmer and warmer. I write about the strangers I saw sitting on beach towels, just like me, thinking about nothing of their regular lives — fully immersed in a fantasy with loved ones, or without them. I write about the shells that touched my feet and how they felt on my skin. I look again at the pictures taken on this beach. It's the same beach I have seen today but I know it can't be. Time has changed it in ways I can't comprehend. How can I find something that no longer exists?

I fill the pages. I find my interview with the concierge.

“You used to work as a bellhop here?”

“Yes, apa, I worked here until I was nineteen. They don't give you promotions here. Not when you are a bellhop. So I went to another hotel. A smaller one. And there they gave me a desk job. I know how to read and write, apa, you see. They understood they could do more with me.”

“Do you remember this girl?” I show him the picture. “Or the parents?”

“I don't remember them, apa.”

“I was working as a bellhop. We just meet the guests when they come in. And there are so many guests. And this is so long ago. You understand, right?”

“She is my sister. Can you remember nothing? They came in the summer. Their car broke down. Their clothes, do you see anything in the pictures? Anything at all?”

Library

“No, you don’t understand. I am letting you see my books. You can hold them. You can read them.”

He went close to the shelves, to the books, and read the titles. He picked one and with the book in his hands, I had the feeling I was letting go. Some door had opened, some constriction removed, and the thing leaving me became more forceful and smooth as he opened the book. It is between people that magic happens. I had known it and I was now feeling it.

He opened the book somewhere in the middle, and upon reading the words, the highlighted words, the words that were marked under with my pen, the words that were under my gaze, I saw him, as he realized.

These very words had touched my mind and now he knew. Not glazing over, but they touched me, and deeply pierced me, and reached a place instinctive, unknown. Unfathomable but human. Of contradiction and of the soul.

“You wouldn’t lie to a book?”

He knew I couldn’t lie to a book. Just as I could no longer lie to him. Here, he was seeing the person behind the guise. He knew, now, we were ready to hurt each

other with full immunity. He flipped through the pages, faster, reading and taking in all that he could.

At Night

When he is awake and thinking, I can't sleep. I like to sleep when he is asleep so I'm not missing his life. When it's three in the morning, I feel the afternoon air and the cigarette on his lips. I imagine across oceans to see the mornings and hear the crows. Hear them call, the way he hears them call. I pass through deserts and canopies, and under unfamiliar waters, on top of palm trees, over shells and beaches, dark jungles, ruby skies, every night, I am traveling to him. My heart races as the sun sets. It is an exhausting task. As a child, I've always been wary of evenings. I did not know why.

He is free now to be a king. And I am free to read my books. I pile them, like Hana, to see how high they might go. All the ones he wouldn't see. I hear the years crackling by. Understand, he wanted things, and I wanted other things.

When I do sleep, I have strange dreams. Black swans. Moths.

The years glow like fireflies. Dimming before I can love them. And I am hiding within these inverted years while I wish to be mad at him. I live near trains.

I read Adrienne Rich's poetry on those wishing trains. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I read *Three Lives* by the Potomac River. *The Lowland*. I read *Middlemarch* for the first time. *Americanah*. Gaskell's *North and South*. The days and

the months pass, and the opportunity to ever tell him what my heart truly desires dries in the summer heat, and is crushed like the autumn leaves, as the world makes way for winter storms. There are no monsoons. *Death with Interruptions. One Human Minute.* In the spring I read *Bluebeard. Dora Bruder.* New trains at the metro when I read *The Little Virtues. The Cinnamon Peeler.*

There are two mornings in each day. He dreams in one and lives in one. My heart rises with both. I return to the other side of the world to feel one morning and one night. I return in order to sleep.

I see a sunset and it's not him.

Only when we are unreasonable can we find something authentic within us.
And I believe in the force of the human heart.

Midnight dances.

Williamsburg

I am in Williamsburg, Virginia. There are no monsoons here. But sometimes the skies get dark and rain pours, uninhibited. Puddles gather around the trees. Rabbits hop in the spring. Dogwoods blossom. Underneath the shade of trees, I see the squirrels disgrace me as I overtake their space. I sense inchworms in my hair. I'm on the Sunken Garden. I wait for my friend. I have my copy of *The Awakening*. Last week I was under this tree reading *Sense and Sensibility*. Pink and yellow tulips stand in praise of summer tidings. I hear canons go off. I belong now to another time. I tilt my head and see past the grass, the dirt. Men march down the street in red coats and breeches. Women wave their handkerchiefs, dressed in gowns and petticoats. From the sky, wigs and caps and horse shit. I see my friend in the distance. She is walking toward me, two coffees in her hands.

There are a few secret gardens on campus. Tucker Hall, for instance, has a small garden of its own and people rarely go there. There's a fountain with a cherub spouting water. I read for my political philosophy classes there. I need to focus on Plato's words. I read *The Republic* in that garden. I read *The Prince*. *Perpetual Peace*. Rousseau. Rawls. Hobbes.

Why do we ask for permission when we have already made up our minds?

Daruchini Dip

I wake up in Cox's Bazaar distressed: a day has passed. Deba will be here soon. Her flight will leave tomorrow and she will be in Dhaka the following day. From the hotel I take an autorickshaw to Teknaf. Looking at the picture in my hand one last time, I gather some courage, and walk to one of the fishermen preparing for the journey to St. Martin's Island. While I am terrified of this undertaking, and I know how I might be putting myself into unnecessary danger, I believe it is the only possible option for me. I have to recreate everything as it shows itself on the photos. This is how we got to St. Martin's the last time. There is a picture of the three of us together on a small boat. I assume it was the fisherman who took the picture. In Dhaka, I searched our home to see if I could find the old camera that took the pictures. I found it in a drawer in the guest bedroom. But the thing is unusable. Old and broken. In the drawer I found all the cameras we have had over the years. Like the photos, my mother has been holding onto them like artifacts of our past, worthy of attention.

I negotiate the fare with the fisherman, pointing out how I could just as easily take a tourist ride. The boat shakes as I place one foot. Can you take a picture of me? I ask.

We leave Teknaf behind us. Soon we are cruising through the Naf River. I shout to the man over the loud engine, asking him if the waters are always this forceful. My hands tightly hold on to the wet wooden seat. It had rained earlier, around dawn. From my balcony at the hotel, the waters on the Bay seemed like the ones filling the large, blue drums I saw in our village when we visited the family

house during the summers. There wasn't any air conditioning. The fans set on the low ceilings were of no help. We sat and sometimes laid on the stone benches my grandfather's grandfather had built in front of the house. He was proud of that house, my father often said. Though it is impossible my father would remember him. My grandmother, a few years after she married my grandfather, began her own garden behind this house. It was that garden in the village that set the desire in me to have my own in the city, in Dhaka. Years after her death, my uncle still plants something new whenever he visits. Rarely something would come out of it. Shrubs with plumerias blossomed one time. I remember rows of summers, laying on the hard, cold benches, my head touching my mother's or my father's, whoever was lying on the other end. My arm exhausted from fanning my sweaty face. Occasionally I would send a breeze to the other person. Until finally, my hand would give up and I would let it dangle, and hear the low sound of the bamboo fan scratching the floor. I could also hear my younger cousins, who still played in the insufferable heat, panting like dogs under the sun, surrounded by their playthings, though the only thing they were under was the oppressing darkness. The electricity freshly out, once again, counting hours, we waited. One hour of electricity meant two without. Sometimes we were treated with an extra hour. And when the electricity came back, my aunts would take their children to bed, cheating them into sleeping through the night under the illusion of cool comfort. And peeking through the bamboo shade of the roof on the porch, I would see the night sky while hearing the mosquitos buzzing in my ears, wondering why, not a single brush of cool air blew in my course. The furious waters shake beneath me, and I am brought back to this daylight.

I ask the fisherman how long it might take us to get to St. Martin's. We should be there in another hour, he says. Though the waters are rough, so it might take longer, he adds.

The coral island is about nine kilometers from Teknaf. I have read about this island in articles and stories. One story even titled in its Bengali name, Daruchini Dip. The fisherman warns me. He senses the weather might become worse. Don't stay here for too long, he says. I will be back tomorrow if you want a ride, he adds. Can you take another picture here, at this coast? I ask.

I leave my belongings at the hotel and take a walk through a massive breadth of land covered in stretching coconut trees. Daruchini Dip, coconut island. Myanmar five miles away. The island is just three square miles. The place isn't as busy as I expected it to be. In my research, this was supposed to be the most inconvenient place to recollect the past. But now, I find myself walking in a peaceful space, interrupted only by the noise of birds, and at times small groups of tourists. I spot a painter, her head turned to a canvas flooded with flaming colors that are not present in what she sees. I sit under one of the trees and pick out the photos I have already tried. I look at the ones where we are at St. Martin's. There is one in this maze of coconut trees. My mother and I are posing for the photograph. My father must have taken it. We are holding a tree on both sides like a lamppost. I look for the tree. Trees, yes trees. Time touches them less than others. This must be it. My fingers shake as if I am about to touch hallowed material.

I am sitting in the car, my doll sleeping on my lap. We stop by a gas station. I see my father standing outside the car, leaning on the door, smoking. My mother waiting quietly in the front seat. The lonely night casts a shadow on me. I felt it. It

was like a sea. Like a sadness, the night found me. I didn't know what that would mean for me. But I knew that the night would once again, someday, lay its dark shadow on me. Touch me, so I would yearn for the morning.

I find myself on the beach. There is a photo of me touching the corals. I touch them too, now. Grey-black corals cover the shore. Their coarse exteriors bring no new memories. A void in the space of a time that should have been mine. The waters come close to the coast, breathe, and pull away. Strong, forceful waves in motion. Dinghies row up and down on them like paper boats set free. A cloudy day on a lost land. I have thought about coming here for so long. I've found it. I've found it in me to get here. Coconut trees look like giant dandelions: their fronds blow away from the sea. Sands marked with human presence. People hidden under umbrellas. Birds. I take notes. Are these the things my mother saw? Are these the things she mentions when she speaks of Daruchini Dip? You were enjoying the sea, like it was yours, my mother once said. I don't think I've ever seen a place as beautiful as Daruchini Dip, she said another time. And each time I remained quiet.

I walk all over the island. I walk because I know I can cover it. I search the whole island. I see all ends. Every tree, every bird, every sand. I take photos and take notes. The sunset is like none I have ever seen. Perhaps the desire of being here makes it so special. Or perhaps it is what it is. Fried fish for dinner. Before I know it, the day ends. it's dark. But nothing stops me. I go on in the dark, uncertain night. I walk, and take notes. I walk through an open market. Lanterns are lit. Shredded corals painted in sharp blues, greens are piled, each priced at only four or five taka. I choose a postcard. The picture on it is of a sunset. Once again in my stomach I feel the disappointment of having learned nothing about the past. My phone rings. It's Deba.

Are you having a good time?

I'm in Cox's Bazaar.

Cox's Bazaar? Oh, I've always wanted to go. Take pictures for me, Radhi. If we had more time I could have gone with you.

The weather isn't great here, anyway. When does your flight arrive?

My flight arrives around ten on Saturday. Nothing has changed so far. You don't have to go inside to get me.

Are you going to argue with me on this?

Yes.

All right then.

At night, as I slip into bed in St. Martin's, I pause, thinking if the whole damn thing will sink. I find islands unreliable. I get up from my bed and open a window. My thoughts return to our village home and the wind feels unnatural. My legs hurt from walking. My notebooks rest beside my bed. I take out the camera and flip through the photos I've taken today.

Under the sheets I feel suffocated even though the room is cozy. The front desk manager has apologized but I know they must have turned off the generators since the weather is nice, cooler. Plumerias enclose me, creeping and growing around my thoughts as I fail to fall asleep. I find the postcard I bought at the market and write behind it, *this darling, I will remember this forever*. And I wonder, if I will ever send it.

Memories

Partho asks if I would like to go somewhere. The delight I feel. Sure, I say. He leads the way. Our school is close to railroads.

We are on a train, just like that. The train, rough on the edges, shoots through dense jungles. We pass through the heart of the country. Fragrances — familiar, shy notes. Rails going on endlessly. Rustic bells chime, their hollows fill with sound. Wires hanging over the metal ceiling. Electric sparks enlighten us. Bolts of light on our thoughts. I ask him, where are we going? Cox's Bazaar, he says. My heart speeds through the twilight, on the rough train that calls out, beat by beat.

The train stops. Next stop, Cox's Bazaar.

Let's go back, I say.

Why? You always want to go places, don't you? Why not Cox's Bazaar. Imagine us on the beaches — that sun. It could be something we will remember forever.

Maybe we can go some other time? Let's go back. There should be a train returning soon too. Come on, I say, taking his hand.

Memories — the vernacular of spices. My clothes, stained yellow with turmeric, drying on a wire in the humid afternoon air. Turmeric in my hand after dinner. The pens perfumed. The warmth of cumin in our house. Purple flowers that hold saffron. Rose water on prayer mats. Rainstorms for invisible rebirths on mustard fields. I wish to be lost in those fields.

How does the sea smell?

The train ride back is always shorter and much less exciting. Like a night sky empty of fireworks.

“I don’t remember anything,” Partho, I say. “I try to imagine what might have occurred. But I don’t know — my imagination fails me. But I think intuitively I know. Like when you are around someone long enough their behavior begins to show what is on their mind. I’ve been around my mother long enough to know what she thinks. In the afternoons when she is kindest — she laughs so fully, at the silliest things I say — I know her best then. She talks to me about books. The Bengali ones, the ones I haven’t read and she tells me all of the plots without a breath and says, ‘I’ve ruined it for you, haven’t I? No matter, you will enjoy it anyway.’ Then there is the sudden silence once the stories have been told. And I can see her mind wanders for something else, and all at once I find myself outside her room, locating a new place to wait until she might need me. I wait in the living room, watching TV, re-reading my favorite articles from the newspaper, editing my own stories for the school.”

We arrive close to the station in Dhaka.

“Don’t you like it, now that I’m here?” Partho says.

“Oh yes. I like it more than anything.”

“We don’t ever have to go to Cox’s Bazaar.”

“I like that idea too.”

Symbols

A cross over a word naturally means deletion. Spaces are marked with dots. Insertions of words or phrases are done with arrows. These are my self-made symbols for editing before I find a book about copy editing symbols. Until then, these invented symbols are my clumsy catalogue to revisit the downpour of words. Flat words are removed, resounding ones gaining authority and space. The slaughter of sentences, the addition of commas. Notes on the sides. Symbols on the text. Creation is scarred with markers of revision, the scars leading to clearer sentences. The removal of an unprepared thought. Organization to create coherence, purpose. Writing, still outside, trying to come in. And whatever sustains is most valuable.

When I learn I can edit, that I can go back, erase and correct, it becomes a world of creation and erasure. The presence of these symbols on the pages ease my senses.

The interior of our home appears to me like a page. I think of the spaces as quarters of attachment or alienation, spaces I've marked for revision. The living room has three places of attachment. There are two couches that face each other. I lie on both, my back without support, exposed to the air. Another part of the living room is

where the center table sits, about two feet from the north-facing window. This is a place where I like to re-read the newspaper in the afternoon until the final bird calls welcome the evening. The last place is on the floor next to a money plant. I sit here when it is too hot. The rest of the living room, the other couches, the side tables, the paintings, embroidered pillowcases — are ornamental for my existence. Though those spaces are invaded by other, I revise and reconsider them from my known spaces.

Since I was very young, I have dreamt of houses. These are made-up homes. I've been to none of the houses appearing in my dreams. I like to think these are the quarters of my mind. And in each dream there is a challenge, some obstacle that needs to be overcome. In one of my dreams I am on a terrace. There is a house right next door. My job is to jump over to the next terrace. This recurring dream always ends with me falling through air. In a different dream I am traveling to a mansion on a dark night. My job is to find the secret rooms. When I find the ordinary rooms I wonder, within my dream, why these unexceptional rooms are hidden. I am probably missing something, and there are clues to puzzles I don't recognize. Another dream where I enter an empty house, empty rooms. At the end of the house there is one room with a closed door. Each time I am about to open the door, I awake. In all these dream worlds, in my own bed, in my own home, I remain homesick.

One day, I awake on the other terrace. The day begins with an achievement. The rest of the hours, I simply wait for night.

Other Worlds

This house is divided like the chambers of the heart — some rooms I cannot enter. The despair I feel when Nazrul roars at twilight. My mother locks herself up like a madwoman. Her loneliness drives me wild. And I escape to my own worlds. Open up to me, I call. Show me what I'm made of. I read tale upon tale, travel to lands made in other minds.

Here I am in the middle of a desert. A plane crashes and on it is an English patient. He loves Katharine. And Hana weeps over his burnt body. Now, I am on Cathy's moors. I move with her wild passion. I sense her home, as if I've already been there. And then I am in Gatsby's mansion. I hear him sing into Daisy's ears under the burning stars.

I wander in these books with characters who are strangers, but intimate strangers, who share their worlds and their hearts with me. Within the pages, I am taken into their reality, a reality otherwise lost to me. The characters, in their motions and movements, reveal truths about themselves and I trace with my finger over the black words what they mean. I keep these revelations close to my heart. I allow the words to reveal to me my own self.

I don't think any of this would make sense without books. In the haven of make-believe, where shadows are energized by uneven light. Where else would I go to find peace? These too, are my homes.

School Hours

The building is old, the architecture of an abandoned era. Pale, high walls. No paintings, no art. Spider webs in unattended closets. The furniture painted blue. Only when you look out the oversized windows does it seem like there is life. Noon. Children on swings. Voices of teachers in floral dresses, fingers raised, scolding. And I must be thinking of February because I remember orange cotton saris. Kites in the sky. The crows calling, still unaware the sun has risen, and we are well past the beginning of the day. My school years make me think of breakfast because after breakfast I see Partho. I stand outside of myself when I think of him. I see him and I feel my cheeks burn. "We could walk together" he says. He is always on time. Conversations are so easy. I try to understand his voice and his words and where they might be coming from. These emotions are new. And before anyone else can tell me what they mean, I let my mind define things for me. My testimony of the wind on my cheeks when he is around. I think of the gates at the entrance of the school, open to strangers walking in and out. The strangers who walk in have the impression of the school yard simply being a deserted field without inspiration or resourcefulness. Most holy lands are deserts it seems. A sandy area for children, a softness for their falls. The school yard is next to windows leading to the music room. At the assembly, the

national anthem is sung on a harmonium on this yard. After the bell rings at the end of our lunch break, students return to their classes while Partho and I stay behind. In the dull and empty yard, next to the fading building, his lips are on mine. Our heads are clouded with the lilting voices from the music room.

Writing in the Dark

The temperature drops in the evening and immediately the electricity is gone. Nobody is here but Partho and I. I am working at my desk, writing an article for the school newspaper. Partho is reading on my bed. A dark night, darker still in the presence of a burning flame, fluttering between us, in and out, like the whisper of a continuing dream. The omission of sorrow for a daring moment.

“We need more literature classes,” I say to Partho. “I’m tired of reading the same plays, the same three Jane Austen novels and Huckleberry Finn. They were great the first few times.” I readjust sentences and grammar. Picture frames line the inner windowsill.

“But you love Jane Austen and Mark Twain. What other books would you have us read?” he asks.

“Contemporary fiction. We don’t know how the world is now. I want to know about things that are important right now.”

“You know that’s not going to happen. And you have your own library here,” he says, gesturing with his hand. “So why bother with this, Radhi?”

“I’m not the only one. There are other students who think so too.”

“You know you’ll lose the funds for your newspaper if you push the principal.

He wants features on his school. Glowing profiles of his teachers.”

I stare at him.

Partho returns to his book with a sigh.

In the next hour the electricity returns as Partho is about to leave. I hand him the article to read as he says goodbye.

“Bring it to school tomorrow,” I say as he passes the gate under the cover of a starless sky.

Museum

I am standing on the remains of a destroyed museum. The walls have been torn down by an earthquake. Surrounding me are broken glass, sculptures, and paintings. Plaques to showcase history and origin. An archive of human emotion. I am standing on an exhibition in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. An earthquake destroyed land and with it took lives, homes. And following the tremors came everlasting rain and flood.

I pick up a wet ballot and take notes. I keep handwritten notes. I read them before I type my findings. I pull a metal sculpture to release a hidden stock of blank ballots. They pour out with the rainwater and gather around my feet. Unannounced rain. Ripples forming on the surface of a painting hosting clear floodwater. The colors slowly dissolve.

I don't search for cover. I place my notebook in my satchel as the rain becomes more pronounced. The ballots are getting wetter. I am unsure if I should take copies for preservation. Two young children hold up a painting, not far from where I am. They examine it, point fingers and laugh. Here, even in destruction, art has done a lovely job. Maybe that is all it is meant to do. I want to take the paintings with me. The roads are blocked by debris so we took a more complicated route, through a tunnel, and then over a bridge. "How did the bridge survive this catastrophe?" I ask

my companion on this journey. Jonathan is a local journalist who is helping me while I'm in Haiti. At the end of the bridge, houses rise on the neck of a mountain. The solid-colored buildings haphazardly broken, collapsed inward. A city laid out like a theater, on the Gulf of Gonâve.

“So you said, the ballots came in after the rain?” I ask Jonathan again to be sure. “Yes, they just came in with the rainwater and now they are there in the rubbles of a museum, mixed in with paintings and sculptures.”

“And the election happened two weeks ago?”

“Yes. Somehow the sack of ballots ended up in a museum. Whoever was hiding it must be working there. Or used to. After the earthquake, who knows.”

“Are they allowing people to wander in the rubbles?”

“There isn't a cleanup crew. Not yet.”

Vivid and bright paintings of life in Port-au-Prince. Haiti represented in art. The colors are dark under the clouds. Paintings of life in the city — the city itself now underwater. A painting of a woman, her hair tucked behind her ears, a basket in her hands. The artist's name scratched off from the work. There might be some record of who created it. A painting of a tree with brilliant flowers, children gather under the flowery branches. The petals produce a blue blanket on the ground. Strong lines dividing subjects — people, trees, homes. No illusions, straight and clear marks of territory, all energy focusing on a few colors. Here, another painting of a society in the sky. Obscure birds flying in the stratosphere. Finally, four animals — a giraffe, a lion, a zebra and an elephant — living in harmony in an unreal world.

An estimated twelve to fifteen thousand paintings destroyed in the shocks of an earthquake. I am standing on the remains of one such gallery. I stand around

scattered human nature, in floodwater, in a foreign land, thinking about my struggle with my work. It's not as compelling. I write something, and I just don't find merit in it. And then there is always too much happening. And the more I cover, the more there is to uncover and it's becoming increasingly difficult to keep my readers' attention, as I don't always know who my readers might end up being and how they might be moved. I feel the rumble of a train though I see none. Rainwater collecting in the frames, moving colors.

I. The Party

I notice, even through the music I can still hear the bells on the rickshaws and the sudden skits of thin tires. I turn up the volume to block out the noise of the traffic.

The beds are made. The shoes, newspapers, and messes are cleared. My aunts are visiting from our village to spend Eid with us. All day the music plays and my grandmother cooks for us. The smell of parathas wafts into the rooms. My aunts peel oranges on the kitchen floor. They bring new nakshi kathas for our home. They show them to me. Do you like the patterns? Aunt Eva asks.

My father has two sisters. My aunts, who when they turn or move, remind me of my father. It is as if there is an imprint of him under their skin. They are the ones who live in our village and we visit them in the summers. This was the first summer I didn't go so I haven't seen my aunts in a while. The first few times, in my earlier years, it was good to look forward to the summers in our village. It was good to think about the generous and encouraging words my aunts spoke as they saw me attempt at creating patterns on nakshi kathas. But then the rails went on forever, summer after summer, they went on relentlessly. The constant scream of a dying star. And I could see our journey back and forth and the time in between like a vision. Their repeated words began to lose their effect on me.

My grandmother and I picked two deeply-colored jamdani saris— one green, one blue — for Aunt Eva and Aunt Kamrun. Jamdani saris were born in Dhaka. The designs on these muslin saris have a Persian origin. My aunts wrap the saris around themselves once, twice — thin cotton protecting against approaching rain. Templates of flowers, outlines of Bengali shapes. Bangles like a rainbow. It's going to rain, Radhi, says my grandmother. I think it will be light, I reply. Let's keep the windows open.

Partho waits outside. It's evening. I see him through my window. He waits for me in my garden, standing next to a well that has been broken for ages.

Bay of Bengal

Around daybreak, I go to the port and find the man from yesterday. He seems happy to see me. The river is calmer today. I am eager to return to Cox's Bazaar, to wander those beaches and see if anything jumps out to me. This day, one more day, and then Deba arrives. She knows about my quest.

Do you remember nothing from this time? She asked.

No, I don't. But I make up ideas of what might have happened. I have this notion in my mind that the trip was a very important part of my life. And not remembering makes me think I am missing some important clue to everything. And I think I do know what happened, I said. This is what I remember, Deba, this is what I remember — some truth had been revealed, and the possibility for my family to ever be whole had been obliterated. In my mind at least. Things changed in our home. And here I become a child. Least able to control things.

Your parents are happy now, aren't they?

That's just it. I need to know what happened that tore us apart for all those years. My mother's relentless desire to leave. Then when, finally, it was time to leave, she stayed back.

You could just, ask?

I can't, it's too, difficult. I think if I could just see, or even know a little, all of this might become easier.

You can't remember all your life, Radhi. And if you are hoping this, this memory, of something that might be painful, or broken, well, you can't expect it to give you anything holy. You can't fix broken things with other broken things. Why is it that you need this now, Radhi? Have you thought about that?

When I get back to Teknaf I waste no time and head back to the beach with my bag on my shoulder. Before I get on an autorickshaw, I stop at a general store to buy another notebook. Two notebooks filled with two days' notes. And now a third.

On one end of the beach, there is an abandoned ship where they have tours. There are photos of me and my parents on that ship. I get into the broken ship with the rest of the people who are curious to see this relic. The ship, *Druto*, is from the late nineteenth century. The huge plaque at the entrance elaborates how *Druto* stopped on this Bay and never returned to the seas. The iron built its roots on this coast, the ship reveling in its strength, daring anyone to undervalue the power of time on its side. The inside reeks of a metallic smell mixed with the odor of fresh polish. I make notes. Most of the spaces are cut off for renovations. I take out the three pictures taken on this vessel, almost dropping the rest in the process. In one of the pictures my mother is standing with my father, his cheek touching hers. I am also in the photograph. My mother appears to be pulling my hand to get me in the shot. I am looking away from the camera distracted by the coins in one of the displays. I find this case on the ship. Is this why I collect coins? I read the dates on the ones in front of me. The etchings are unfamiliar. I once added four coins to my collection after going to a gallery in Washington D.C. It was late September. I had made plans to go to that coin gallery weeks ago. That particular September evening, wandering about from stall to stall while looking for something to add to my precious coin collection, I had found four pieces incredibly similar to these coins. Staring at the box full of silvers and coppers, I find it impossible to make these connections. How far deep must these memories be?

I leave the wretched ship and head back to the beach. This is my last day at the beach. I wonder if this is my last chance at learning anything. Why am I here? There

is a storm coming. Bold colors puncture through the clouds and cover the ocean's surface. I have long believed our desires show themselves in our actions even when we don't plan things consciously. There is a map the subconscious is constantly laying down, in hopes, that when the opportunity presents itself, we might consciously reach out and finally do it — do that which we truly desire. Or miss the chance if we are still not prepared. I have lost my actual memories of this place. The imagination of what could have been here is far more poignant and vivid than any reality. And even now as I see this place with my own eyes, see it for what it is, my idea of it and my feelings for it, remain unknown.

The guards ask us to return to shelter. I try one last time standing in front of the Bay. I am pleading with the Bay. Something might happen at any instant. Something might become visible. I hear voices shouting from afar. The storm is coming, leave, leave now. My mind is foiled away from me. Winds are picking up, faster and faster. I am here, wearing my red and blue cotton dress. I am a child again, my mother and father must be right behind me. I could turn around and see what they are saying to me. I could attend to what is happening. I could listen. Or perhaps, this is a chance for me to ask them all of the questions I have scribbled down on my notebook. I could show it to them and they could tell me what is happening in each photograph. The water crashes on my bare feet. This could have been bittersweet.

At dusk I stand here on the Bay, watching, as the ancient ships sail their way to me. The sky is heavy. The sun barely visible. The sand on the beach glisten in a fading grey light. Boarded on those unfortunate ships, those ghastly souls, turn their raw gazes onto a land they will not understand. A land, I will not understand. Wanting the unknown, feeling endless, I decline into the currents. Pulled down, by the longing, nasty, unforgiving Bay. Nothing comes to me. Nothing at all. My dress is soaking wet

as I rise from the sea. The rain begins to pour. Drained of all energy, failing, I join the crowd, and leave the Bay behind me.

There are some parts of our lives that for some reason or another, simply become untouchable. But, knowing, may not be enough anyway.

Mountain Girl

The weather settles over the night. I drive back to Dhaka in the morning and wait at the airport for Deba. I wait outside on her request. I sit in the car until my phone rings and I see it's her. She must have activated her phone.

Yes, I'm in the parking lot. I feel like an idiot, waiting here, I say as I close the door behind me.

Please, I'll find you.

It won't be any trouble.

I know. I'll find you.

I lean against the car. I rolled down the windows on my drive from Cox's Bazaar. I wipe my face with a towel. I see Deba walking towards me. Her eyes look tired.

I forgot how long the flight is, my back hurts, she says.

She is wearing a green shirt, her hair, a braid tied into a bun. She takes the time to braid her hair for work too. Deba tells stories with her photos. She is a photojournalist. Our friendship formed slowly over the course of a year. We were both interested in the same kinds of stories and we learned we worked best when we collaborated. It became Deba and Radhi, Radhi and Deba. We don't work together often but when we do, we produce some of our best works. Her photos strike with my words, illuminating the story. I remember the first time we met. It was about three years ago when I first joined Washington Daily. I asked Deba about Darjiling. Her family moved to the United States from West Bengal when she was fifteen.

"Trains curve around the hills. At the end of the ride, you smell of tea."

"What else?" I ask.

“Open spaces, Radhi,” she tells me. Deba belongs to the mountains.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” I ask.

“We don’t speak Bengali. But I understand what you are saying. Most people in West Bengal know Nepali. My ancestors are from Nepal. That’s why we speak Nepali in our homes.”

Darjiling rises out of the world like an iceberg on the surface of an ocean. Darjiling: place of the thunderbolt. Mountains with snow-covered peaks and tea gardens on the slopes. The music coming out of the lips of tea pickers, songs of loss, compositions of longing and belonging. The afternoon heat on their backs as they stoop to pick leaves, one leaf at a time. The lyrics lace themselves on Kanchenjunga rocks, and with the rocks the words age a billion years, echoing in the monasteries. Words that cut between mountains, flowing with the river, Rangit.

“I miss my home most in autumn. When there are leaves here in potholes, between trees, between houses, and when I carry them into my apartment. It reminds me of the baskets full of tea leaves in our living room,” Deba says, the first time we get coffee together.

Deba looks around my room. The afternoon light bounces off the mirror. It didn’t used to be there. The bed on one side. Red tie-dyed curtains that match the bedding. A bookshelf the size of a wall. The lower shelves overflowing with newspapers, yellowed with age. Copies of every article I wrote for the school newspaper in its short lifetime. Clippings of articles I read in the local newspaper. A painting of a sunflower. Audrey Hepburn posing for Breakfast at Tiffany’s. It all remains the same as it did except for the mirror. I like to think my ghost appeared one night and moved it to the other side of the room. Deba looks outside my window.

What a lovely garden, she whispers. This is the one you spoke of? They've taken care of it. It's not as bad as you thought it would be? Hmm?

II. In the Garden

I meet Partho in my garden when the party upstairs quiets down. The garden sits behind my childhood home. An odd piece of space in the city, where there is so little space for everyone. I find myself at awe, constantly, my good fortune when my grandmother told me, Radhi, the garden is yours. It wasn't much of a space for anything. Rats roamed through the loose shrubs. Each summer I brought back seeds from our village. One summer I brought the plumerias. Another summer I brought back hibiscuses. Over the years I tried many plants that failed. And the hibiscuses were one. Some plants remain with loyal persistence. Tomatoes on vines. Sunflowers, low and rough on my feet, grow ceaselessly without my interference. The prints on leaves — gentle bones holding fractured skin. Slowly, it became a place of respite. It was a changing garden. One season it gave guavas, another season, coriander.

The garden looks at the house, year after year, as I look at it from my room. There are pipes on the left side of the house. Rusty metal. The brown patches on the white paint show like markers of age. Khea's shed in one corner. There is a well, near-center.

We don't use that, child, my grandmother explained to me. We can get water from taps.

Then why do we have it? I asked.

It's beautiful.

In the dry summer days, when the house becomes too hot to inhabit, I find myself lying here, working on assignments, readings, homework. The yellow sun like turmeric paste on the face of a bride-to-be. I would lie around in my enclave, hour upon hour.

This garden is a place I can transform. My visions and formation of the worlds I create, and understand, become real here. It's a place fitting for the slightly mysterious, magical sensibilities. Washing, purification of the mind happens when you allow something other to enter. As it is, it just remains, soils and expires. My garden became not only a place of vision, but also of unwavering safety. A place where I could not be ashamed of the unexpected human insecurities that take over. Here there is space for the unbelievable.

My hands wrap around Partho's face bringing him in closer. Like a fever he takes over. I feel a kiss coming.

Records

I re-read the summer letters my grandmother wrote for me. I've saved them in a folder, carried them with me to the other end of the world. Here too, they have an honorable spot on my bookshelves. In one letter she writes to me about an uncle, Shorob, who fell off from a coconut tree during a storm. Ever since, Shorob keeps mixing up the names of his children. My grandmother had relatives all over the country. Bangladesh being so small, it's not unusual relatives moved on from Khulna, my grandmother's family village. I suppose this migration from the center happens in every family. Aunts and uncles whose faces I have never seen but known through these letters.

"Listen, and I may have told you this before," she writes before repeating an old story, the one where Umma, another cousin, on her wedding day decides not to get married. Instead of just saying it to the groom, Umma goes on stage and shouts it to the guests. She then proceeds to tell everyone on the streets, marching down in her red wedding sari and heavy ornaments. The sun on her deep henna. The news probably went where it needed to go. The wedding parties still went on for three days.

Rohim plays cards with his friends all morning instead of working, my grandmother writes about a brother. His wife keeps pushing him to go and with every

push another round begins. Rohim's wife promises she will set the house on fire.

And in the letters, astonishment presents itself. "How could he?" she would write. Frustrated and hurt. In the next few sentences, these pains are lost or forgiven.

"Don't tell anyone," another letter begins, and I think how if my grandmother knew it, everyone knew it. Secret affair were mentioned. And I wondered why these were shared with her since the accomplices surely knew about her inability to keep things quiet.

The letters grew more somber after my grandfather died. Only the serious accounts of deaths and illnesses entered the composition. The letters, coarse with age. At the beginning, a quick mention of her health and how things are at home. About twenty relatives were mentioned in these letters, and they each took turns in wilder and wilder stories. Their faces, heights and mannerisms were known to me, passed down by my grandmother. Rohim, a lean man with hair falling past his shoulders. Sometimes it is her reminiscing her own childhood and people who died. "I think I will die peacefully," she often wrote. "Everyone in my family has died so simply and so easily."

Not everything was gossip though: a new cricket team, the renovation of an old village mosque, the condition of the crops. Attached to a letter is a sheet of paper with the names of seven generations of ancestors. "This is as far as it goes," my grandmother's handwriting on the top. On the list she also wrote our family myth: two men from the east, maybe India, rode horseback and settled in Khulna. There are no sources to verify this, my grandmother writes. I can hear her disappointment between the words. A sigh transported in the envelope.

Some of these letters I have read so many times, the ancient tales memorized. I can see her sitting down in her printed sari at the dining room table, where she sat

like it was her throne, writing page after page, all I have missed in these two months. She wrote to me after I left Bangladesh, though less and less frequently.

I think of the wild dancers in the family, and the parties at our village to celebrate a wedding that did not take place. Piano music entertaining the lowlands. I think of my grandmother's thick fingers on the paper. I think of a distant aunt who has been accumulating stray dogs. She has about thirty dogs roaming her land, their unified howl welcomes guests.

Monsoon

My teacher instructs how to move the pump on the harmonium. I copy her maneuvers. The harmonium, a hand-held organ, shaped like a rectangular wooden box, is the only musical instrument I learn to play. My teacher asks me to pay attention to where I go, and before she can even finish scolding, my fingers are on the wrong keys and an outlandish, irregular sound comes out. Focus, she says. I am taken by the intricate designs carved on the wood. This is my first lesson and each time a sound comes out of the machine, I am surprised. Outside, it rains.

In the villages, the grey clouds gather like a ritual, preparing for rain. The world so dry, the body so sweaty, it makes you think rain will never come. The earth thirsty, calling for water, and like granting a dying wish the skies break — then monsoon. The landscape loses all visibility. Flashing white lightning. Gentle animals hide under long banana leaves. The land awakes. Ground less stable, muddy. In the city monsoon is airy. The ground does not melt as it does in rural spaces. In the city, attention thrives in the humid air. It is about the disposition of the mind, less about the body. Gutters fill with dark rainwater. I put these categories of experience because the city, maybe like all other cities, moves too fast.

Monsoon is a turning point. Pushing all the way from the Bay of Bengal, it

arrives. The winds fill the emptiness and releases the unexamined burdens residing on my chest. Sitting on the floor of our living room next to a money plant, I play the harmonium as it sings with the air of monsoon rain.

Gossip

My grandmother died in the year 2004. I received a call from my mother. She was sick for some time, her kidneys were weak but what killed her was a stroke. My grandmother loved the summer heat. But she loved it only in her house. While I was off for the summer with my parents to my father's village, she remained behind. For about two months each year we stayed apart. In the meantime, there was writing and collection for when we would meet again.

My grandmother knew certain truths, but kept them safe from me. She was a woman who understood emotional capacities. She was also an oddly romantic lady. Her decisions were marred with an air of love. Her nature was to give everything, even death, a proper celebration and a truthful amount of consideration. However practical her judgments really were, her enthusiasm could no help but make onlookers wonder, if it had all been conceived in the heart.

She took afternoon naps. And her showers where scheduled at noon. She cooked. Boiled eggs in curry, white rice, fried ilish, eggplant with potatoes, chicken korma. She spoke with pauses, waiting for a reaction before she moved on to a new topic. The reaction to assure her you heard what she had said. It was difficult to get out of a conversation and not have her voice buzzing in your head. There was very

little to no time for resentments. Too much conversation is lost in anger. She seemed less curious but more informed about all things and all people. She was in perfect harmony with objects — a woman grounded in her place. She enjoyed gossip with a thirst. And it wasn't ever anything everyone already didn't know. Though perhaps people had learned it from her in the first place. It was never meant to create bitterness or violence, for her, at least, gossip had a strong element of humor in it. Looting small truths to create watermarks. What she was doing, really, and this is something I have learned after examining the letters we composed for each other during the summers, was that she was creating characters for my world. The odd way a distant uncle stares at the sky and calls back to birds for exactly an hour each morning. Or how one of her brothers liked stealing dinghies, because "it's nice being in court on Fridays." And in these letters she repeated these stories like I must have forgotten them since the year before, adding new and increasingly unbelievable details, until something stranger happened in the family.

It was important for her to give me a history of gossip, so I didn't forget how to entertain myself with my own past and revisit what I can claim to also be mine. Something, I understood only after the year 2004.

Interviews

For the past three months this newspaper, a reputable one, has repeatedly been covering the same strange story about an elephant that swam into Bangladesh, alive, from India. The first few weeks the story appeared on the front page of printed newspapers and posted high up on the “Latest” section online. New details emerged in each new publication: the elephant’s origin, guesses on how it possibly traveled through floodwater, how it might be a symbol for the strengthened partnership between India and Bangladesh, what elephants like to eat. Once it lost traction as a front page story, it became an ongoing piece, showing up, again and again, with critical attention put on all kinds of factors involving elephants traveling through floodwater.

“Why is this happening?” I whisper.

Deba and I are sitting in a study, overflowing with stacks of newspapers. The study belongs to Gorob, a journalist we have been communicating with for the past few weeks. He’s been updating me about the incident in Sundarban. But now, we discuss why his newspaper has been continually publishing stories about an elephant.

About a week ago, I got a call, Gorob begins.

Gorob’s son opened the door when we came after dark, as we were asked, and we were discreet, as we were requested. Deba and I entered Gorob’s study, both of us visibly shocked at seeing the stacks of paper. His son waves a hand, gesturing we could sit anywhere. Our stunned expressions amused him. He’s about fourteen.

“My parents collect the newspapers where my father’s articles are printed.”

He said.

“All of them?” Deba asked.

“Then every few years a paperman comes and buys all of it. It takes him four or five trips to take all the newspapers. I don’t remember the last time he came so it can all be a lie.”

“Wouldn’t it be more prudent to collect just the articles?” I asked.

“Explain it to them.”

Iman Radhi? You go by your last name? Gorob asks.

No, my last name is Ahmed. My parents couldn’t settle on Iman or Radhi. I prefer Radhi. I usually leave out Ahmed.

Radhi, then. And Deba?

Deba nods.

Yes, I got a call a few days ago, Gorob begins again. The person calling informs me about my boy’s route to school. Told me about where he goes, where his friends live and how often he visits them, all his whereabouts. Times, when he leaves, when he returns. How old he is, how he looks, what grade he’s in. And I quietly listened, waiting for him to be wrong or for him to reveal some weakness, a lack in knowledge, I could use to my advantage. But there were no holes, there was no way in which he didn’t already know my son as I know him, or so it seemed to me. He hung up once he was done speaking.

Is this about the village? I ask.

I don’t know and I don’t want to find out, Gorob says. It’s not about me anymore. And to answer your question, this is why we write about elephants.

Soon after the incident in Sundarban, a journalist was murdered in her house.

Deba asks if the two have a connection.

It's not clear. Again, the murders didn't leave any clear indication as to what incited this horror. But she wrote about this, as you already know, and continued her investigation. She was working on other stories too so it's not clear. Though her parents are convinced it was this story. Have you talked with her parents yet?

Tomorrow, Deba replies.

Who do we have on the board as possible culprits? I ask.

The government? Opposing party? It's harder to find things when people are too scared to speak but I am searching for answers. It's not like it was, he says now looking at me directly. We can't always speak the truth. By that I mean, we can't speak of what is relevant. This elephant has been swimming in for weeks. It's all we are allowed to talk about. Our job, now, is to distract.

Did you try joining a different paper?

And the same will happen there. If I want to do this, write, I have to do it wherever I can. You know this government is afraid of you. Right? You're still safe. This is power. This is real power and you have it, and like all other kinds of power, this too can be lost. If you don't, well, why are you here? Why are you really here, anyway?

The next day Deba and I go to talk with the parents.

"When did this happen?" I ask the mother.

"April 23rd."

"At what time did you hear about it, ma'am?"

"I got a call. It was from their servant. It was minutes later. He said he opened

the door and that's when they came in—”

“The attackers.”

“Yes, the murderers.”

“How many were there?”

“The boy said there were four.”

“Were they wearing masks?”

“No, they were not.”

“What else did the boy say?” I see Deba slowly walk around the living room.

Focusing on the objects. The multicolor pillows. The embroidery of a dingy on a five feet canvas. The white layer of dust on the black coffee table. The sound of a pressure cooker.

“He said they went straight to my daughter's room. She became quiet. They stabbed her. Strangled her husband.”

“Was there anyone else in the house?”

“My grandson. He was in the living room.”

“Was he there the whole time?”

“Yes.”

“Is he all right?”

“He is. He is all right, and with us.”

“What about the servant?” From the corner of my eyes, I see Deba wandering their house.

“He ran out the door. He said they pushed him aside. He said he sensed something terrible when they came in. So he left.”

“Can we speak to the boy? Is he still with you?”

“No, he went back to his village,” the father speaks. “We let him go. He

opened the door. Though he didn't know who it was."

"He didn't know, yes, he didn't know," the mother responds.

"Can you come back here, Deba, please? Can you please speak with them?"

"Thank you, ma'am," I say in the woman's direction before exiting their home.

I stand outside. Rickshaws crawl. I hear Deba behind me.

"I don't want to go back inside," I say. Of course, I will. "I just need a minute."

"What's wrong? Speak."

"You know what's wrong. I feel like I'm invading her daughter's memory, and I know, we do this for work all the time. But this — this is personal. This is what she used to do too, and she's dead because of it and now, here I am, imitating her daughter, or something — I'm just not feeling comfortable doing this to these people." I take a breath. "And you are of no help."

"You don't need to take this out on me."

"I'm not. I'm just really frustrated."

"Radhi? Radhi?"

"Yes?"

"If it helps," she deliberates, "Radhi, if it's of any use, we are journalists." She waits a moment. I feel her kind hand on my shoulder. "Journalists of this world. It's a community, you know that, right? This is work, but now, in this case, it's also us paying our respects. And we need to do both. It's good, you are here taking a breath, but you need to get back in there. This is your job, and this is your duty."

Early in April, a journalist in Bangladesh was murdered in her own house. She was in her bedroom, working on her desk, when the intruders attacked her from the back. She was stabbed multiple times. The attackers strangled her husband. At the time, their four-year-old son was in the living room...

Stubborn Minds

I ask Partho how his day was. He tells me. I ask him if he has a lot of work to finish for tomorrow. He says, yes, I need to go. I ask if he could stay a little longer. He stands. I ask why he bothered to come if he just wants to leave. Filling out more forms? I ask. Yes, he replies. Why do you have so many forms? I buy time. He is cruel. He wants to leave. And I want him to stay. He waits at the door and says he can't come in. He has to go.

We both make up our minds and rarely shift.

I am constantly distracted and he puts things together with an unbelievable focus. He is rarely surprised but always pleased. He is great with numbers and estimates things like he has an invisible tape to measure them, even the unpredictable ones. "This must be five acres," "four days till winter," "five more miles" — he guesses and it happens.

He looks at Dhaka like it's untouchable, like the same song repeats in his head. I say, "there is a surface you need to go past." He takes pleasure in the things that are here with a thirst I don't. He likes parties. I like to wander outside. It was already late by the time we met. Steel minds.

He appreciates it when I say, “well this is certainly something I would like to see.” But he just doesn’t understand why I need to see it. No, he understands it, but just doesn’t feel it in himself.

I think more than anything, it is his nature that he let’s go and he moves on. That ease with which he understands. There is a turbulence in me that isn’t in him.

There is a freedom that reigns in his stability. He has found his home within his reach but the same cannot be true for me. I witness his happiness like a joy I have never known. I want to be free, like he is free, and I want to be happy, like he is happy. I often measure the distance between us in this manner. He doesn’t want maps and maps are all I want. He watches me read. He remembers days and dates.

Our stubborn insistence to protect each other’s natures. But still, we both ask a question. We are allowed one question. Both earn the right, I think.

Do you have to go? he asks.

The violence in the act of leaving.

Why do we ask for permission when we’ve already made up our minds?

God, with a stroke of a brush, marked our minds with such blue rigidity.

Somewhere, something in the universe is torn apart.

If I could push all ground in one place so we could both stand in the same space.

You wouldn’t come with me, would you? I ask.

I find comfort in his laughter. How free it is! How free I wish I were. I wish to be like the laugh that cries from his chest.

Book Fairs

Women wear jasmines, gently placed in their hair. Braids coiled into buns. Floral tiaras on little girls. Hand in hand, couples walk with lists in their pockets, searching from one stall to another, the best books for the year. The bees buzz. I've been here every year in my childhood. I'd take the books to our village and read them by mid-summer. In autumn I would borrow books from my mother's room. Every other afternoon I would go in and talk to my mother before I was shunned out. On my way out, I would grab something for the rest of the day.

Walking among the people at the fair, I feel spring. The mustard fields are coming to life once again in our village. Dinghies passing through the lakes and rivers, our villagers taking in the new foliage. The mud houses once again becoming soft. Silk cotton flowers turning acres and acres of land into a mixed hue of red-orange. Soon, jackfruits will roll down the hill behind our village home. Some of them would crack wide open, the flies making their homes in the sweet yellow flesh. My aunts will pick the whole fruits. After clearing the flesh, the collected seeds will be sundried, then boiled, and added to vegetables. The outer rind, left out for our cows. No parts gone to waste. My cousins hate the fruit. They sing: it smells!

Partho and I walk in the fair. I see faces bright and healthy, blooming

alongside everything else. We stop under a tree. A woman rests with her child. The child is hidden. Nuzzled between her mother's breasts, she waits. And then peeks about and looks into my eyes from her safety. She loses her preoccupation soon and turns back to that familiar comfort. Her concealed hands, pressed between her body and her mother's, come out forcefully, and with an equal violence she wraps them around her mother's neck. Her hold tight. She is hurting her mother.

I slept next to my grandmother when I was scared. Her tender breaths turned into low, steady snores, and with that my eyes closed for the night. And in that house, my grandmother's house in Dhaka, played Nazrul's music. Here I had my dance lessons. The thud of my feet shook the house. My anklets echoing with Nazrul's rising beats. On my grandmother's insistence I sang what I practiced at school. And so music filled through the corridors, late into the night, when the dishes were washed, the table set for the morning, everyone in their beds. Sometimes the harmonium synchronized with my voice. Sometimes it was just me. Like a last lullaby, in case death overcame, the music put us to sleep.

Language

Bengali is a voyage, a civilization of endurance. A descendant of Sanskrit. Sister to Hindi, Nepali, Sinhalese. Circular scripts that curve within themselves. Signs to give stress. Letters combine themselves. I am drawn to the combinations. They turn into complex symbols with two letters, maybe stresses too, all happening at once, closer. Letters wearing one another like hats. □□□□ for one, is a favorite of mine. You can find it in the word friendship. Different from the English alphabets where o is just o. And o has its own place in the word.

Brother to Assami, Marathi, Punjabi.

Though, this is how it is for me — Bengali feels hard on my tongue. Harsh like rain on tin roofs. The words release themselves from my mouth, strong footsteps — fierce, articulate and knowing. My exposure to the language is of a breathing loneliness. And even when I'm not alone, when I am with Partho, or when I am with my mother, the words are capable of causing irrevocable pain. But that is not what I want to do now. I am in a sea of language and I acknowledge my inability to conquer any portion of it. I'm trapped, I could say. This is a place of horror for me. You know that? I could say. I've shown that to you. I can't be happy here. I can't be who I want to be. He would know what I mean.

But he already knows what I want to say. Chasing words. Pretending words. Perhaps it will sound less harsh in English, it will be a compromise, gentler. My books fall flat when I demand to be understood. The moon must be alive somewhere else too.

I'm with Partho at his university. This will be his new life. I like how the city encloses the university. Not far from my home. I can commute. I could go here too. We could be together if we wished, closer. He wants me to know that. Wait for me here, he says as he enters a hall. I'll be done in a bit. Then I'll show you around.

I see a girl my age lingering outside, walking in the empty hall. Her loosely braided hair hanging down her left shoulder. She waits in a silk sari that looks like it's from Rajshahi. Rajshahi, the city of silk and mangoes. Bengali women treasure Rajshahi silk, saving it cautiously for a special event that rarely presents itself. Bengali men save their punjabis. The clothes sit in rusty, steel almaris, waiting to feel appropriate for the occasion. I walk around the campus, explore the land.

Red brick buildings, signs of age and education. Domes of hope. Coconut trees shielding the halls. Statues of forgotten soldiers. Statues to celebrate Bengali. To remember the ones who served their souls for the speech on our tongues. And then all of a sudden, a collection of tamarind trees. The fruits dangle from the branches. My mouth wets at the thought of the sour taste. An open space. I think this is a good place for rail lines to split the ground. Race the mind anywhere. Partho finds me.

"They have a good journalism program," he says as he approaches.

"Let me just see you here," he says. "And you could see me, and we could be here finding one another. Isn't that enough adventure for you? What is it that you

want to say?”

Anything coming out of my mouth is going to be harsh.

“You’ve already decided haven’t you?”

Inheritance

It may not be the way my mother skips stairs. It may not be her small ankles. It may not be the way she waits for dust to gather on things so there is a sense of accomplishment when she finally cleans them. Coal on the blades of the fan. It may not be her handwriting. It may not be how she memorizes words and sentences so she could recite them when it gets quiet. It may not be how she likes to catch and set butterflies free. Or the way she collects the names of cities in notebooks and how she reads them aloud like nonsensical words. The obscurer, the better. Or how she senses earthquakes no one else seems to notice. Or the dizziness when she rushes to a conclusion. Or how she likes to open umbrellas in the house because “it actually brings good luck.” Or how she spends her whole life trying to understand human relationships. Or how she vehemently denies her white lies. It may not be how conversations halt without warning. It may not be where she stresses syllables. Or how she furnishes her mind when she is bored. It may not be how she sent herself into exile. It may not be how she jolts at the sound of a bell or a paper clip falling on a clear mosaic floor. It may not be how she locates her center several times a day. It may not be her earnestness when she changes her mind. Or how she seizes objects as if they will slip through her fingertips if she doesn’t act fast.

It may not be the way she knows she did the right thing because it felt right and feelings, must matter for something.

It may not be her eyes I inherit.

It may not be how my grandmother says, oh she used to dance, just like you. Or the way she fell silent and never sang again. Or the way her curiosity opens with a book and the way she reads it as if her life is on the scales. It may not be the way she collects her shoes, torn, broken, cherished. Or the way she makes her bedroom her own home.

It may not be her fire I inherit. The kind that knows how to burn the self.

It may however be the voyage: a civilization of endurance.

Mothers and Daughters

When I called my parent to tell them I am coming to Dhaka, my mother immediately knew it was for work. I told her I will go to Sundarban, into the jungles, to see for myself how things have been destroyed. I told her what story will bring me back. She mentions Reza.

“Who is Reza?”

“Aunt Eva knows the family. They live in Rampal, right outside of Sundarban. You can live with them and Reza can take you to the village. Your father can call your aunt and make the arrangement.”

I’m packing for our journey to Sundarban. Deba works in the living room. I pack extra water bottles, rain boots, granola bars. My mother enters and sits on the bed. She asks if I need help.

“I’m almost done.”

“Do you need me to pick up anything from the grocery?”

“We have enough to last a day.”

She looks around the room as if searching for words but when she speaks they come out rehearsed.

“I was looking at our albums. The photos from Cox’s Bazaar are missing. Did you take them?”

I nod, still packing clothes.

“You could take a few but all of them, Radhi?”

“Which ones do you want me to take?”

“You keep them all if you really want them so bad.”

“No, here, take them back,” I hand her a notebook holding the pictures.

She takes the notebook and throws it on my desk, then marches out of the room. I follow her. She stops and stands in the corridor, faces me, wanting a reaction.

For my mother this was a matter of habit. She would tell me she wanted to leave my father but would never do anything about it. She would be angry about things but would never leave. She would play it in her mind, how it would work, and where we would go, but eventually every time the answer was a quiet no. We were never going to leave this home. The doors had forever trapped her and with her, I was trapped too. As a ten-year-old, I would often ask her what was wrong. Why she was upset and what was hurting her. But this was her prison. The one she carefully constructed for the rest of her life. The unhappiness didn't entirely stem from what was happening at the moment. It was the very specific choices that brought her here. And to love someone, like my mother, who didn't love life, was a god-awful task. There might never be a way to really fill this chasm.

We are standing here, my mother and I, in the thin lining of the house, in the space between the rooms, a place created for the very purpose of passage. And it is just that. What is being said isn't a revelation to me. But it feels surreal. I looked at her thinning hair and considered the spaces between the strands. I am thirty-one.

One night in Williamsburg, we had a telescope viewing of Mars. Mars was passing by closer than usual. A line formed, giving everyone the chance to see the planet. So near. I was hearing the ohs and ahs and with every step I became more aware of what I was about to experience. It was my turn to look into the glass and see something new and feel something surreal. I thought of the distance between me and

Mars. I tried to think of the time it would take to get there if I were moving at this pace, slowly, one step at a time. But when I looked at the planet I felt nothing extraordinary. I squinted my eyes and looked harder. I looked up at the student handling the instrument. Her enormous smile was a reply of assumed mutual amazement. But I didn't feel Mars.

I didn't feel Mars until now, as I look between my mother's loose strands and realize the surreal is happening in this thin space. In this corridor. All the distance of time collapsed right here. I am the stretch of space between here and Mars. Earth and Mars rotating around the ever-glowing Sun until it dries out and it's nothing but the planets loose to wander in nothingness. What matters of the distance?

"Tell me the truth," I say. "Tell me the truth," I repeat. "I know this is perhaps not the time but tell me why you married him." I have asked this question several times over the years. And her answer is just as before, "I don't know. It all happened so fast—"

"No, don't blame anyone. Tell me the truth." A knowing smile forms on my lips, my eyes pleading gently. This is knowledge that needs passing. Her face smiling in mutual understanding.

My mother loved someone once. Then she married my father.

"Was it worth it? Was it worth it, hurting him?" I ask, my smile disappearing. "All of this, right here, was it worth it?"

"I know you are hurt. But Radhi, you must know I was listening. When you danced, when you sang, I was listening. I was listening so you can sing or dance or write your way out of here, if you wished. And you were brave to leave."

I pack my bag, faster.

What It Means to Dance

My mother is a dancer too. She went to the Nazrul Academy of Young Dancers for eight years and professionally performed with her group. In the afternoons, she talks about her life as a dancer. The parts of the country she went to and how it felt performing each time. She fell off the stage once and with her, she took two other girls. One of them fell right into a poorly situated table of food. The other broke her arm. My own mother came out of the folly scratch-free. The guilt of surviving without any wounds was worse, I tell you, my mother says.

I have a teacher who comes in five times a week, in the evenings, and teaches me to dance. This has been going on for five years. In my first year I learned the basic movements and this was difficult since the world spins in the other direction for me. When my teacher moves clockwise, I move anti-clockwise. I am left-handed, you see, and that was a struggle for a while. The next struggle was learning how to put down my foot, loud, so the sound of the heavy ankle bracelets echo. I learned how to be firm in my steps, because that is the only way you can dance to Nazrul's music. A temperament of rage and a resolve to be freed.

There are two things I learned from dancing. One, I am part of a space. Two, I can be my own person within that space. My mother gave me Nazrul for the

revolution of the soul. And for my heart, she gave me Tagore.

Dancing is my evolutionary instinct to fight against flightlessness. Dancing, means the world for a moment has become a symphony, all objects, living and dead, in tune with a momentary gesture. Dancing means to show my interiority. Dancing breaks the silence of stillness. Dancing provides the comfort of understanding through the movement of the body: no story is linear.

Dancing means being closer to my mother. Dancing means our experiences can speak. In the afternoons, I can share with her, how I easily lose count of my steps. She tells me how the same thing happened to her. It is a flicker of connection, and even though I turn the wrong way, never quite get my footing, I dance so we have another thing to talk about in the hot afternoons.

Open the door, ma, it's me.

Khea

One year, right before Qurbani Eid, Khea comes to our home. I find her tied to the gate in front of our house. To give her room I take her to my garden, and when my grandmother finds out there is a scolding. “The goat could have hurt you, Radhi.” Though she is right, at the time, I can’t believe Khea can ever do such a thing. My goat already has a name, though unbeknown to me, she is planned to be slaughtered in about a week. The night before Eid my grandmother comes into my room and explains why Khea has to be killed. Before this, we’ve had cows come and leave, and I didn’t care for the large creatures. But Khea is different. She has sleepy eyes and her fur is soft and a deep black that shines in the sun. Khea bleats and the noise she makes is incredibly funny to me. And the more I speak with Khea, the more she bleats. My neighborhood friends say Khea finds me irritating. In any case, I convince my grandmother that Khea has to stay permanently. So on Qurbani Eid we have chicken. My grandmother explains to the guests who visit, “she becomes so attached to things.” A fault.

But Khea has been sick for some time. She rarely eats and when she eats, she seems displeased. And just as before, she bleats when I speak to her. “She doesn’t understand a word,” my grandmother says, repeatedly.

I usually visit Khea in my garden after school. When I return from school one afternoon, Khea is peacefully lying in her little shed. The shed was made the weeks after Qurbani Eid. A small tin roof, wooden walls. A cemented floor made a few months later, after several requests, “so she doesn’t drown in her sleep,” I explained to my grandmother.

So I come home, and Khea is in an eternal sleep. I walk over to Partho’s house, three streets down. The three of us — Partho, me and our maid — take Khea to Partho’s house, where there is a small plot, a little area next to the building. We wrap Khea in a bed sheet, the maid brings from my closet. All afternoon, we shovel in turns, until we reach ground that is deep enough. “I’ll have to explain why we have a dead goat here,” Partho says looking at the freshly covered ground. Near sunset, Partho and I go up to the terrace. From his terrace I see the roof of my home. We wait for the sky to shift colors: blue, purple, deep pink, burning orange. I see terrace after terrace with clothes drying, moving swiftly, as the sun takes to another world.

Tumi Rabe Nirabe

My formative world began with Tagore. My mother introduced me to Tagore's music, Rabindra Sangeet, when I was very young. The music played, while I played in the living room. The music was soothing. The lyrics however were beyond me. My mother no longer played Rabindra Sangeet after Cox's Bazaar, when we moved into my grandparents' house. Instead, Nazrul echoed during my dance lessons.

When I turned nine, I was given a music teacher. She would come in the evenings, after my dance lessons, and we would practice on the harmonium. I would sing, the lyrics devoid of meaning. The songs rolled out of me, one after the other. But slowly, over time, the words began to make sense. The songs, less music, more poetry, gave expression to concealed feelings. The vibrations of language received space. Language that inserts itself and makes you wish for more. The words touched me and made me wish for an affirmation, a refined pleasure, one that assumes harmony with sufferings. The lyrics fell on my ears like cashmere.

I believe Tagore has felt what it means to be Bengali to the core. Questions of longing, of curiosity, of uncovering the depths of emotion, of distance to allow for comfort, and of unwavering sincerity.

The triumph of finding what you heard of, and the pain of suffering what you

now know of, two things, I hadn't put together yet. Soft words fastening themselves to the night, bringing closure to the day. Nothing shrill but a longing that enters into dreams. A baul mad in her search.

“Tumi rabe nirabe, hrdaye momo.”

“You will quietly reside, in my heart.”

Rampal

In the jeep Reza asks about my aunt. She is doing well, I say. The man wears a teal shirt, brown pants. He has large glasses that fall down slightly every time he sneezes. Within the first five minutes he sneezes about ten times. Please excuse me, he finally says, I've had a cold for a while now. Thank you for hosting us, Deba says. When she sees him, he is already a picture. She finds where the light could fall to bring energy. She knows where he would move next, and in anticipation she prepares, and captures the movement in momentum. A seeker of the near future. Features given life for another life, racing beyond time. Life spilling out of the frames.

Yes, anything you need, he says, so many people lost their homes, it's tragic. We have a few guests in our home now.

That's very generous of you, I say.

Yes, I've known some of these people my whole life. I can't say no to them. It's a bit crowded but there's room for you. Do you think the government might give them new homes? When you write this? They burned them, he says with an open mouth, sneezes, and finishes—they're responsible.

What happened? Deba asks.

Can you tell us what happened? I repeat in Bengali.

You can speak to me, Reza says. I understand English. So does my wife, Nipa. She's very excited to meet you Radhi.

Thank you, says Diba. What happened in the village?

A man came to the village an hour before the soldiers arrived, Reza says. The man yelled for them to leave. He said soldiers are going to come in and burn it all to

the ground. There were rumors of this, so the people were frightened and believed the man. Thank God they believed him.

When did the rumors start?

It was going on for weeks. Most of the summer. We knew they were going to build the pipeline. It was going to happen, and there was nothing stopping it. He sneezes.

Did all the people leave? Were there any casualties?

No there were none. They made sure. When they came in on their jeeps, some of the soldiers went in and cleared all the houses. So they were empty.

Where did all the people go?

Most of them were waiting deeper in the jungles. I think they still are. Some of them came closer to the city. The soldiers scared off the ones who were waiting around the village.

How did they do it?

They put kerosene in the houses and lit them up. When I first heard about it I was in my home. I could see the smoke from my window. I'll take you to the village tomorrow, after dark. When there's no construction. You'll see. There's nothing left. It's as if the village never existed. Since they began cutting the trees, they've cleared the mess.

I've set up the living room for you, Reza says as we get out of the car. There are two families living in our guest bedroom.

Can we speak to them? I ask Reza.

I've told them about you. I've told them you'll want to interview them.

Reza's wife, Nipa, greets us at the gate. She takes me into a sudden embrace. I would have gone with Reza, she says, but it's busy here. I've met your aunt, too. You look like her.

In the living room I see a nicely made cot and extra pillows on the couch.

Thank you for having us, I say.

Nipa looks at Deba.

I'm Deba, Deba says.

She's from West Bengal! Nipa exclaims. Reza said you'll bring a friend from West Bengal. Is it like Bangladesh? I've never been to Darjeeling.

I look at the two girls running around the dining room table.

They are our guests, Nipa says. Mira! Joti! She calls out.

The children continue to run around the table. Two women walk out of a bedroom. I realize they are Mira and Joti. Deba and I greet them.

They are the journalists? One of them asks.

Reza nods.

They want to speak with you, Nipa adds.

"It's a small village," Mira says. "There are about a few hundred people. We all know each other. Though, the village has been thinning for the past several years. It's too hot. People are moving to the city."

Mira's daughter comes up to her a few times. She sits on her mother's lap. Joti's daughter is on the makeshift cot. She stands on her head, her body supported by the living room wall.

"Most of our supplies come from the city," Mira continues. "Our primary source of income is fishing. The Pashur River is right by us. It's the kind of life we

enjoy.”

Joti waits for her turn. She tightly clings to the end of her sari, wrapped in her fist.

“How long have you been living in this village?” Deba asks Joti.

“All my life. I’ve grown up here,” Joti says. “My father did too. We are used to living in the heart of the jungle. My parents are living with an uncle in the city now. Right around this street, actually.”

“When did you learn the government wants to build a pipeline through Sundarban?”

No one is outraged, Deba says to me from her cot at night. They seem calm.

It’s been a few weeks, I say. They are trying to fix things now. Isn’t that how it works?

It's Still August in New Market

We are in New Market, gliding past people. The rain is unbearable. It punctures the sky and falls on us. Captured and closed. Monsoon controls me. Pressing against my thoughts, becoming heavy memories. Blue plastic covers the carts from the rain. Transparent plastic saving the books. Mango carts next to toys next to pineapples served on plates. The salt on the pineapples wet like sand on a beach. My heels are three inches deep in mud. Lines of gold and silver stores. It makes me think of a silver bracelet my grandmother gave me on one of my birthdays. Vendors convincing patrons why they need these things.

I say to Partho why I need to go.

White and grey pearls, rubies. Handmade raincoats.

If there was a little bit room here, perhaps, we could dance like before. Like when our minds were open to beliefs and new thoughts, and imaginations that could take us anywhere, together. A loving place. Like when we met, and when he and I thought that this might go on forever.

Do you want to eat anything? I ask Partho. No, I'm good, let's go, he says.
Our hands are locked, together. Our sweaty, exhausted bodies push against the crowd.
I crave space but I also don't want to leave New Market. I take off my dupatta and
cover us like the treasures in the carts around us.

*

When I was with him I felt the entire world, its history — like it happened, but I missed it. A hopeless feeling, but a darling one too. Flawed but welcoming, like the tenderness of a lost love. Like I knew. Like it's still August in New Market. Whether I am there or not, it's always August in New Market.

For all the risks I have taken, entering my own heart has been the most difficult.

In the Heart of the Jungle

I feel a fever coming. The afternoon heat touches us. It makes me oddly comfortable. We wait for Reza.

“My jeep is old,” he says. “It takes time to warm up.”

After a few minutes, we move. Quickly, the city turns into trees. We arrive closer to the jungles, closer to a tropical landscape. The Sundarbans. The roads become rougher, uneven. I breathe in the green, hoping it would cure me. The Sundarbans take up an area of 3,860 square miles and about three-fifth of this is in Bangladesh. As you go deeper and closer to the coast, the Bay of Bengal, the forests turn into mangrove swamps. The most common mangrove tree, sundari, gives the forest its name: Sundarban.

We drive past the Pashur River. Green sea turtles leap out of the water and move stiffly on the supple grounds. Storks walk on stones. It becomes harder to move against the roads. Reza stops the car. “It won’t go any further,” he says.

Deba and I are in heavy rain boots. We walk next to mangrove forests. The saline is thick in the air. I can feel the salt in my lungs. The salt of the seas. Thin trees with entangled, exposed roots. The waters have been rising here, Reza says.

“Have you ever been here?” Deba asks.

“No, not once,” I say.

“Of all the places, isn’t it so strange how there’s always so much more to explore in our own homes?”

The sun pours through the dense forest. Its yellow light illuminates the road ahead. The landscape becomes stranger, far moving, and disruptive. My thoughts return to the Bay. We are so close to the waters.

“How far is the Bay of Bengal from here?” I ask Reza.

Before Reza could speak, Deba responds. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Do you think we can walk to the Bay?” I manage to say the full sentence without completely exhausting myself.

“We are not here for that,” Deba’s voice is sharp.

I’ve heard the land changes in the Sundarbans. A landscape in motion. I worry if we can find our way back. Strange thoughts. It can’t change that quickly, now can it? I begin to feel hot. I spot a rhinoceros.

Deba touches my arm. “It’s getting hot, Radhi, do you want water?”

Reza immediately pulls out a bottle from his backpack.

“Can’t tell you the number of times I got dehydrated on my walks down this path.”

“Is this path safe?” Deba asks.

“I’ve walked this way so many times. It’s a roundabout route. But really, it’s safe. Stay away from the trees though. Monkeys.”

The sun burns out. We walk into the new clearing.

“This is where the village used to be,” Reza says.

The way Mira and Joti spoke of the village last night. Deba’s footsteps behind me. The trees are cut. The ground, balding. Open trunks with circular years counting. They lay across the land like hiccups. Painful to swallow. Acres and acres of free land. Land with no meaning. Wild creatures fearfully roam. I feel sick and exhausted, my body sweating from a falling fever. They wait in the heart of the jungle, anxious eyes, hot breaths on the barks of the trees. Pay attention, pay attention now. The Bengal tiger wanders aimlessly. The deer stares. Fingers linking the stars. Homes

burned.

“Stay here, Radhi,” she says.

I sit on the ground and watch Deba walking around taking notes. She comes back to my side in a few minutes.

“I don’t want to leave,” I say.

“No, we have to go.” Deba’s hands pulling me up.

I lean on her as we return to the edge of the forest, walking back the muddy route we took here.

In the jeep, Deba looks out the window. She is thinking and I can tell the carefully chosen words are forming on her mind. Taking a lonely moment, she leans in and whispers, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder, “It’s a good thing, falling in love young. Still when our hearts are open and vulnerable. It’s a good thing to be without cynicism, for just a bit. A good place to return — a good source of faithful empathy. All of us should return to a source like that, or something else, something irresistible, powerful, in us, if we are to do this right.”

III. Midnight Dances

The flowers I plant, bloom for me. Melting flowers. Wet petals. Guavas, and their full red hearts. I'm not misplaced here. This is my garden. And he looks up and smiles to the stars. My hand in his. Dirt on our feet. His hand wraps around my waist. The moon looks down. A wish echoes from the well. A kiss on the forehead. I can hear the sound of our bodies move. Rain water burns dry on our skin. It feels as though hours have past, and the party upstairs has slowed down. The soft music reaches us through the open windows. Almost inaudible.

"I want to see all the stars," I tell him. My own voice takes me out of a trance. "And trace them back like the bones of a map." Like a clock that turns backward.

"All right love, show me the way," he says, and throws me back on his arms. My eyes to the stars. They burn so bright tonight. The way he brings fire to a sunset.

Unlike a healer, a true lover. I feel a kiss coming—
In the soft sways of our bodies around the still trees
In the light rain of monsoon
Windless nights,
And midnight dances.

Witness

It has been a cool day. The electricity has been coming in and going out on an hourly basis. It's evening. My parents left to attend a family dinner. The occasion of the dinner party is my arrival to Bangladesh. Now with the fever, I couldn't go. All day I lay in bed, slipping in and out of sleep. Earlier in the morning, I went through the articles I wrote for my school newspaper. I picked out a few and cut the pages and placed them in a folder to take with me. The journalist I met inspired me. But the task exhausted me and seeing how it might be strenuous to get dressed and travel, my mother said, "you don't have to go. But it might seem rude if we don't. I'll ask the maid to put dinner on the table for you before she leaves."

I light a candle and place it on my desk. The flame trembles whenever a cool breeze enters through the window. I am working on the article. The journals from my trip to Cox's Bazaar sit on this desk. The pictures spilling out one notebook, still, just as my mother threw them on the desk. They stay half inside with the written words and half outside. Deba left this morning. "Let it go, Radhi," she said, once again, in an attempt to convince me. "I'll see you Tuesday?"

I am rereading the notes and interviews, often pausing, and looking out onto the garden. Under the night sky everything appears shadowy and unclear. The powerful presence of ravanigandhas in the air. I see the white flowers glow like teeth in the dark. The black, iron gates, short enough to be jumped over, surround the house, including the garden. Outside the garden, there is a strip of trees lining the back of the houses. The garden, like this, is protected from outside attention. I get up and lift the mirror and place it back to where it was when I grew up in this home.

The empty house feels emptier on an irregularly quiet evening in the city. The TV in the living room was turned on and now there is a severe silence in the house.

The silence in the house is too much and in my room it reminds me of the absence of Khea's ill-timed bleats. My grandmother had an old battery-powered radio. I've seen it with the old cameras my mother keeps. I light a second candle and place it on the living room table and search for the radio. With me I bring the notebook of pictures. When I find the radio I turn it to a station, almost like reflex, and I remember how my grandmother would ask me to turn it to this particular station. Music in the house. I take off the cover on the harmonium, which sits in a corner in the living room, and synchronize to the tune that plays on the radio. I miss a few notes, though for the most part, the song comes out evenly. I do the same with the next song. The songs appear louder, and gain a new dimension of reality in our living room. My fingers on the dusty keys. The wires in the heart of the machine must have some rust. I carefully open the top cover of the instrument and find spider webs, more dust and a single earring. A series of commercials play on the radio. I stretch in the living room, feeling healthier than before. I sit on the carpet, arms reaching out, touching my toes. Joints cracking in my neck, my back, fingers. I lie down and move through the pictures. Gentle heat surrounds me as I move through the pictures, a second time. I stop at the picture of me at the Bay. Whatever is hidden inside the sea, remains inside. My interior world, at this bay, remains unknown even to me. Let it go, Deba said, before she left. Let this darkness go.

I doze off on the carpet, and awake hearing screams. The notebook filled with pictures still in my hand. I smell smoke. I get up and look out the window and see people from the neighboring slums and houses looking up and pointing at me, repeating "fire." I rush down the stairs and pass the iron gates.

I think of the candle in the living room still fluttering as I left. I think of the candle in my room. But it couldn't have burned out so quickly. I come down and see a

crowd witness the burning house. Smoke rising in the back, as it appears, it seems like the head is on fire. The front appears intact. I walk around to see, pushing my way through spectators, and just as I suspect, it is near the bottom of the house where the fire seems to be rising and building. It wasn't the candle. My heart sinks.

I finally notice the scene around me. Buckets being passed down from one hand to another, the infinite source somewhere in the distance. Cotton gamucha around waists, the ends of saris tucked in for speed and convenience. Children screaming in amusement. The sky lit up like day. I hear sirens but the volume appears constant. Spectators on the lean street block the fire truck.

"Someone must have set the house on fire, on purpose," says a man with an expression that makes it clear he believes in all kinds of conspiracy theories. Still I realize, he could be right. Reza? Nipa? Gorob?

"No, no," another woman replies to the man. "It started on the first floor. You looked out the window, I remember," she says, now facing me.

Was it me? I think briefly. No, it couldn't have been me.

I realize the fire truck won't make it here in time, and that the single buckets of water won't do anything forgiving.

"I saw her running out," says a girl. "She looks like the angry type." The girl turns to me and asks, "Did you set it on fire?"

"Oh no. I didn't," I say, though, I regret and almost wish I did.

The fire engulfs the house with authoritative devotion.

In my hand I have the notebook of pictures. I think of the old newspaper clippings I've been picking and collecting. It was all I wanted to take with me. Now they burn with the rest of the house.

Partho's house, three streets down. Perhaps the smoke is visible there too. At night, when he sees it in the news, which he must see. There must be some ritual, albeit small, he maintains for me, as I maintain my nightly voyages for him. Watching the news might be his mundane ritual. Anyway, at night, when he learns about the incident on the news, he gets up, stumbles through the dark, and goes up to the terrace and sees. Beyond the spaces and rows of empty terraces, he sees, with his own eyes, the house that is on fire. He sees, the blazing fire, or he sees, the curtain on the sky: the smoky aftermath of dissolved passion.