

Auditions for the volunteer mission to Mars: Stories

by

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the ominous silence of our coal mine canaries
the unending robotic tweets of our new digital imaginarium

Roy Scranton, "Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene"

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THE MONGERJI LETTERS

Since the collapse of one of the last dynasties of the common era and the subsequent end of the era itself, historians have searched for descendants of the Mongerji family, as well as descendants of the scribes who, under their employ, collected samplings of flora and fauna from around the world. The only evidence discovered thus far are the letters that follow. They are from Mr. Mongerji, his wife, Kavita, and two of the three Mongerji children, all addressed to a Mr. Chappalwala, thought to have been the last of the Mongerjis' scribes. Archivists continue to seek Mr. Chappalwala's side of the correspondence.

September 7, —18

Young Mr. Chappalwala,

This once, I wish my family's long correspondence with yours were more of a face-to-face transaction. Your letter telling of old Mr. Chappalwala's passing has stricken us all. The Mrs. has not spoken more than ten words, and even the children are subdued. They feel their parents' grief. I find it hard to write even now—to acknowledge receipt of goods delivered, to speak of our continued business.

But the polar bear you stuck in the inner envelope suggests you are keen to continue in the family trade. That first explosion of teeth and air bubbles as the creature snapped at my face—what flair! I learned to swim backwards that day, you know? It took a week to bail out the living room and pour the Arctic Ocean back into the envelope.

Our three-year-old, thankfully, was in the nursery when I released your capture, and thus spared his first swim. Meanwhile, our middle child, so enthralled by what you'd done, put on a diving suit and plunged right into the water. She stayed there for hours at a time. We nearly

wondered if we'd lost the girl, and it was not until the living room was almost dry that the Mrs., in an inspired frenzy, thought to search inside the granary vase in the corner. We tipped out the last of the ocean into the outstretched envelope and grabbed our daughter by the ankles as she tried to follow.

The Mrs. remains put out. After the first shock, she said to me, "I would dearly like to see that young man right now," and I am not sure if she wanted to scold you for your exuberant capture or condole with you for your loss. She could not stop hugging our eldest boy, so perhaps it was the latter. He, you may know, will inherit the Mongerji collection and one day take over my correspondence with you. He did not like the bear—I believe it might have frightened him—but I think he will learn to appreciate your taste just as I learned to appreciate your father's.

Yes, you may consider this letter a renewal of the contract between our families. The unrest in these parts, I assure you, is a trifle, and should not come in the way of our important work. I enclose the usual sum of money. The clutch of purple bellflowers is a token from the Mrs. I believe they are from the collection, something your father must have sent us long ago. We keep him in our thoughts, and watch how you will follow him.

In anticipation,

Mr. Mongerji

*

June 5, —19

Mr. Chappalwala (Jr.),

Sir, my father requests that I write to you because he is engaged on urgent business in the city, and my mother is busy looking through the collection for important files. He says it will be good practice for me for the future, but I think by then we shall all have to go into hiding. I tried

to explain this to my little sister and brother, but they are silly and won't listen to me. Jayu said she would go hide right now, and snuck into the letter with the sleeping octopus. But I stopped her from taking my little brother in with her. *I am not irresponsible.*

You see, my tutor, Mr. Ali, says the people don't trust us anymore, that they think we own what belongs to them. He says he hears murmurings from the village, and that we should all be prepared to flee. I don't understand it, really. I asked my father why we couldn't just give stuff away if others wanted it so badly—there are so many envelopes in our house that we wouldn't even miss them. He gave me such a look. He said I might as well scatter my ancestors' bones. As if I would do such a thing.

I have been patrolling the grounds with the night watchman, and I think I have another solution. In your next letter, can you send us a stampede? We could use it to frighten people off our grounds. Perhaps, then, my father will see I'm ready for his work—can you believe, he told me to copy from an old letter when writing to you? As if I didn't know how to say "Dear Sir" and "Thank you" for myself.

Sincerely,

R. Mongerji (Jr.)

*

Dec 12, —19

Dear Mr. Chappalwala,

This brief note confirms our change of address. The move to the city has been trying. Our new house is a two-storey apartment. A top-floor loft, to be fair, and much more than I could have hoped for in our rush to secure a new living arrangement after the riots. But it will be quite difficult to curate the Mongerji collection in such meager environs. I am in conversations with

the city's museum directors and the head of the opera house but, until then, most showings of the collection are quite humble affairs, pedestal displays of butterflies and ferns in the living room.

We are fortunate that the brass microscopes survived the move—the mayor was quite impressed with the diatom samplings you sent back from the Great Lakes this summer. It gives me an idea—when you trek the glacial sheets again this winter, would you look out for dark dimples against the blue ice? They are balls of moss collected around dust flecks—the locals call them glacier mice. I am told that entire herds of microscopic, eight-legged water bears lurk in that velvet warmth. It would make a fascinating presentation piece to the mayor. These days I find I need such friends more and more.

In expectance,

Mr. Mongerji

*

August 28, —22

Dear Mr. Chappalwala-ji,

My name is Abhimanyu Mongerji, but you can call me Abhi, like everyone else does. I am writing because Ammi said I must thank you for sending me the albino gray wolf cub for my seventh birthday. Daddy said it was not really meant to be a present—he wanted it for his work—but Ammi said it was only fair, because when Jayu-dhidhi and Rohan-bhaiya each turned seven, she got a fox cub and he got a baby camel with *two* humps.

Dhidhi's fox cub letter is lost, and Bhaiya said he sold his camel to someone at his new school, even though I think someone actually stole it off him. I tried to share my wolf cub with them both, except Bhaiya doesn't really like your letters anymore, and Dhidhi, well, she always

complains that we should go to the cub's world instead of bringing the cub to us, so they're both no fun at all.

I have been thinking—were the albino cub's mother and father also white? I have looked and looked inside the envelope, but I can't find the parents anywhere, not even their footprints in the snow. Please could you tell me what happened to them?

Thank you,

Abhi

*

January 5, —23

Dear Mr. Chappalwala,

I imagine you have reached the Caribbean by now. Had I your talent for letters, I would share my winter with you—it hunkers in this city in a blanket of smog so thick I can barely see the streets from up high. Your long journey south through the western continents fills me with a strange dissatisfaction. I long for the old home, though I have tried hard these years to forget those days of warmth.

At any rate, I wanted to note that the release of your latest specimen caused quite a stir around the city. It moves me to critique your delivery in some detail. The instructions you placed within the outer envelope contained a couple of crucial errors. Surely, for example, you meant for us to “direct the mouth of the inner envelope *away* from the body” before lifting the flap?

I obtained the advised twenty-foot length of strong rope and went up to the roof with my children, as they had never seen such a specimen before. I opened the flap of the envelope and, before I knew what had happened, we were lofted into the upper branches of your bald cypress. We scabbled for holdfasts among the slender branches while, below, the city swung like a

concrete hammock. As I watched our rope slither off a lower tree branch into the fathoms of the cypress roots, I considered writing you a letter, explaining the importance of specificity. Because I should have tied that rope to my waist before venturing into your trees.

My daughter and my youngest, perhaps the world is still new to them, for instead of searching for a way down the cypress, they clambered farther up and out into it. They were in its limbs for hours, hooting to each other as my eldest and I sought our way down.

We were still fifteen feet off the ground when we reached the lowest rungs of the cypress. I will pause to acknowledge that the tree you selected is, indeed, a magnificent specimen. Its trunk is as fluted as a champagne glass, the bark silver whale hide. It must be the last of its size, and I am glad it is now under my care. But this did not strike me then. I looked down into the roil of the tree-beast's roots, snagged into those distinctive stalagmites, and wondered if we would pierce ourselves upon them as easily as dinosaurs once did when they tried to climb *up* such trees in the past.

My eldest was impatient to be done with this adventure—he almost dashed himself to the ground in his haste to get down. I am grateful he suffered no injury. He disappeared downstairs, returned moments later with a poker from the fireplace to help stab and shove and stuff the whole tree, knot by knot, back down into its envelope. As soon as I was able to hop down from my branch, I took over for him. The heights of the tree, as the trunk tapered, were easier to pack away. My younger children were eventually shaken out of the upper branches and back onto the roof—they stood blinking like hatchlings thrown from the nest, their fingers tarred with cypress sap.

My daughter said there were fern gardens in the upper branches jeweled with small insects—that we had to climb back up to see. She looked so adamant, just like her mother, that

my youngest, poor boy, looking back and forth between his sister's face and mine, started to cry. But I am not one to be swayed by tears or tantrums. It will not do to spoil these children more—they have lost so much already I hate to offer them any false sense that their lives as Mongerjis means what it once did. I continued to bend the cypress branches back into the envelope. By dawn, all that was left was to furl back the topmost twigs, the last pale leaf buds. I sealed the envelope with tape, filed it in the closet. I shall ask at the museum tomorrow if there is room somewhere to display a specimen so tall indoors.

You will find enclosed your payment, which you may note is smaller than it once was. I know your living is incumbent upon my support and, by way of apology, I remind you of our impoverished circumstances here. Take care to enclose better directions with your future dispatches, and to pick specimens easier to contain. This is, I fear, no longer a world for exhibitions of grandeur.

In humbled spirits,

Mr. Mongerji

P.S.: Just now the Mrs. informs me, rather briskly, that she had to escort the local police up to the roof to show them we had dismantled the tree in its entirety. She did manage to persuade them that the letter was private property, but we shall soon have to merge the Mongerji collection with the city's to ensure its continued survival.

*

September 2, —25

Dear Mr. Chappalwala-ji,

Ammi looked through my grade four textbooks today and her eyebrows became all one line, she was that angry. She asked me if I knew what an axolotl was. Then she asked me if I knew what lots of other animals were, and I didn't know any of their names, so she went to find Daddy and complained to him about my school and how I wasn't learning anything important there. Now it's decided that when I return from school Ammi will take me through the cabinets in the downstairs big closet, the ones with all the amphibians first, next the ones with all the extinct birds.

But Ammi shouldn't worry, I think, because Jayu-dhidhi is already teaching me all sorts of things in secret about your letters. Today she showed me one that came from the last century, from your great-great-grandfather or something. Inside was a rotten fruit—something long and brown. I didn't think it was special—I wanted to see more axolotls like Ammi had shown me before dinner—but then Dhidhi gave me a magnifying glass, and we both lay on our stomachs with our heads right over the fruit and she pulled apart its flesh to show that there was a small fly in there, smaller than an apple seed. Its body was the color of a peacock, and its eyes were the color of gold, and it was laying tiny eggs between the skin of the fruit and the flesh. The eggs were long and white, and under the magnifying glass they looked like tightly closed flower buds.

I asked Dhidhi whether if we left the fruit outside the envelope the eggs would hatch, but she said that everything trapped inside the Chappalwala envelopes was like an axolotl—it would never really grow up.

I know you are in Cameroon right now, and there are still forests there, so I was wondering, Mr. Chappalwala-ji, could you look for some more rotten fruit and send them to me and Dhidhi? She won't ask you herself, because she doesn't like to talk to people she doesn't know, but both of us are very interested in your letters, and we learn a lot from searching inside

them. If Ammi or Daddy catches us while exploring we will just say it's because we want to learn more than what they teach us at school. They don't have to know we're doing it just for fun.

Thank you,

Abhi

*

May 30, —26

Dear Farshad,

You do not know me, and my husband does not know this, but I once met you when you were no more than five. I must have been some twenty-six years old then, married less than a decade, and utterly entranced by you Chappalwalas.

I had visited your home, northeast, beyond the mountain pass. Yes, in your people's fashion, by letter. The air there was so clear I feared my own breath would pollute it. The ground sparkled with little flowers—I forget their name—that hung their lilac heads under weight of dew. I thought I would never return home.

Your father, if I knew him at all, was too discreet to have ever mentioned this story to you, and you will hardly remember my presence yourself. When introduced, you nodded your little head at me without ever meeting my eyes. You had just learned the trick of putting lizards into little greeting cards, and raced off into the woods beyond the village as soon as your father let go your shoulder.

Nevertheless, I trust you now with the same discretion I came to expect from your father.

My reason for contacting you is to caution you. Since you are a full five years older than my oldest child, I expect you will act with maturity. I am aware you correspond with my younger

children, and I know that your trinket specimens to them enrich their lives better than anything else this city can offer. My youngest, my bright star, flourishes in his knowledge of the natural world. He is the natural heir to the Mongerji collection, though my eldest is first entitled to it. My daughter is wild as grass seed, and if not for your portals into the world, she would run away, I am sure of it. She is my blood, after all.

But do be careful as you indulge my children's requests. The Mongerjis have made their name in the world by asking of others, and we have fallen by asking too much. I do not wish my children to follow in the family's fate.

Sincerely,

Kavita Mongerji

*

July 1, —27

Dear Mr. Chappalwala,

Have you any children? Do you take them on mini-expeditions with you to teach them your trade? How is it among you folk? For as long as I can remember, the Chappalwalas have collected for the Mongerjis, and I never thought to ask my own father how it was our relationship began.

I am attempting to convince my eldest that the great legacy that is our family's work must remain in our hands, even as we are employed and directed by city officials. It is difficult. He is on break from university and occasionally deigns to listen as I narrate the contents of each letter, specifying when and where they were delivered from, the conditions under which they may be opened. Sometimes he will gesture expansively out the window at the city below. He will say, "It's all for nothing, Father, just look where we live now."

I think the boy resents my employment, collaborating with the museum curators. He expected, I believe, to inherit my *work*, not my job. He remembers when the Mongerjis hosted galas in the old home, private exhibitions of specimens, immersive snapshots into distant worlds. Only some months before we lost our home to the rioters I had been coaching him to take our guests snorkeling in the coral ponds we had set up in the gardens. Ironic, that we never had a chance to show off those corals. They were to have been a retrospective, after all.

I sometimes envy my youngest one. He does not remember the old home, really. The vast fields, the conservatory, the many libraries budding off the main house. He was not yet four when the riots happened, has no memory of how he was passed, arm-over-shoulder, from handyman to gardener-wala to housemaid, down the bucket chain we made through the old escape tunnels for rescuing family valuables.

My daughter is sullen. Of course she must be groomed, as her mother was, for entry into someone else's home, but she resists such plans. Since the Mrs. is preoccupied with the education of our youngest, and I try as much as possible to expose the eldest to the museum, our poor middle child, I think, suffers. But I *cannot* take her to work with me. I fear that if she disappears in the museum archives—which are *quite* substantial, even without the addition of the Mongerji collection—I may never find her again. As it is, most evenings when I return from work I must retrieve her from somewhere inside the diminished family files. That is a task in itself—sometimes she won't even empty the envelopes out, instead she just climbs inside. Tell me, is this wise? I have never questioned your family's craft, but I worry, these days, as my daughter becomes increasingly entangled within the mechanics of your letters, whether she endangers herself.

She used to cry when I took crates of our letters—overstock, I started to call them—for transfer into the city museum. I believe she even stole some of those letters, but I have no way to prove it, as I have never been able to find them on her person or in her room. She only ever seems to be in my study, or in the downstairs closet, exploring what little we still keep in the apartment.

Today I shook her out of your last dispatch, the liana humming with weaver birds. She seemed to have no memory of what she had been doing in there. I ask her again and again why she goes to a place where she is as motionless, as unconscious as the words on this page, but she cannot, or will not, explain it. Perhaps it is like sleep to her—she always emerges as if wrenched from some dream. I sometimes wonder if you could deliver us something that would terrorize her, in order to cure her of her addiction.

I remain, a devoted father,

Mr. Mongerji

P.S.: I would like to request, on the museum's behalf, some more showy examples of miniature homes within homes. The liana was a highlight of the summer exhibition, strung boldly against a blank wall of the museum. The public were thrilled to see the tiny beaks poke out of the weaver bird nests, the little flashes of yellow and black as the fledglings tested out their wings—some even asked if it was clockwork.

A thought occurs—could we market postcard versions of some of the large displays at the gift shop? Perhaps some ornamental beetles, or flowers smaller than fingernails? As loath as I am to see Mongerji-like specimens in the hands of everyday folk, I must admit, this is the way the world is turning, is it not?

*

April 19, —28

Dear Mr. Chappalwala-ji,

Jayu-dhidhi is trying to discover your secret. Today, I received a small coin envelope in the mailbox addressed from our own apartment. I tried to shake out what was inside, but it was well stuck in there, so I had to hold the envelope open to my eye like it was a kaleidoscope.

Pressed to the inner seam was a plate of tree bark. On the bark was a small oval of lichen, a thumb-peel of orange skin, surface broken by tiny black cups. Along one of the walls of the envelope Dhidhi had scribbled, “The lichen is blooming!”

It was true—the cups would release spores that would stick to more tree bark and slowly new lichens would spread like slow-motion fireworks across the tree. But that might be many years from now and, at any rate, the experiment failed. Dhidhi took me to see the tree from which the lichen had come, an oak in a city park. Now it has an ugly hole in it from where Dhidhi captured the lichen. It is bleeding from the wound. Dhidhi didn’t want me to see, but I knew her eyes had tears in them when she saw what she had done.

Mr. Chappalwala-ji, I know it is rude to ask you your secrets, but could you send me a hint of how to make letters like you do? Dhidhi is trying very hard to prove to Daddy and Rohan-bhaiya that she can look after our collection as well as they can—maybe even better. After she graduates this year, Daddy wants her to think about marrying, but I know she doesn’t want to. If she could perfect your trick, Daddy might reconsider and let her stay. Nobody else can change his mind, not even Ammi, which is why Ammi never scolds Dhidhi anymore when she does something she shouldn’t do, or goes somewhere she shouldn’t go. I want to help Dhidhi too.

Can you help us? Thank you,

Abhi

P.S.: I have looked in the little envelope again, and the piece of tree bark just broke in two. I am sending it to you to hide it from Dhidhi.

*

June 25, —31

Farshad,

Business first. My husband's weak health these months compels me to assist him in his letter writing. He would like to commend you for your current catches off the southeast coast of Africa. He is particularly amused by the electric blue sea slugs, although the museum is rather more interested in the jellies. They wonder if you might postpone your voyage to Socotra till after the midseason spawn. There is a market, they say, in selling juvenile specimens at the gift shop.

I would advise you to think carefully about this. The Mongerjis are not merchants, though my eldest is convinced otherwise. He is beginning to price the remains of the collection—your predecessors had the luxury of capturing herds, not single specimens, and he is convinced he can isolate individuals for private collectors. I know from experience that separating fragments from those letters is not easy, but he will not listen. No one in this family does.

At any rate, your original plan to reach the south seas off the Arabian Peninsula is a good one. Socotra must be exquisite at this time of year, the sun's blaze sending all but the hardiest of creatures into hiding. Your father once told me he spent four months on the archipelago in search of worm snakes. Perhaps you might confirm that there indeed are no more left on the islands. I

trust you know the trick of carrying a snowpack letter into the desert? I was quite charmed when your father told me of this.

On to personal matters. I suspect you are aware of my daughter's attempts at delivering herself from the city to—I'm not sure where. Perhaps she wishes to escape to you, as I once attempted when I visited your father. If she does show up, would you reassure her that the unpleasant feeling of being caught in a loop will eventually wear off? When I visited your father, I could not stop rubbing my shoulders, as if for warmth. It was as if my body had been hypnotized into doing what it had remembered doing just as it stepped into the envelope.

I sent myself to your father in a peat bog. A square meter quadrant of mosses and ferns, it was, though I only remember the delicate plumes of vapor coming off it, just as high as my knees. The sample had been collected at dawn, the skin of the bog sweating kisses into the disappearing cold air of night. Your father was an artist. His specimens arrived as though they were caught in three-dimensional paintings of their landscape. I do not blame myself for falling in love.

Your father was very kind. Once I had recovered enough, he introduced me to you, showed me his home, took me around the village to meet the rest of the Chappalwala clan. I met your mother. You have her face, I remember, eyes dark as cherry pits. Your father explained to me that the Chappalwalas are like skimming stones—you have traveled so much for so long, you cannot form connections to places or people any more. That you gather together only because you understand each other's displacement—that under-the-skin feeling of being stuck, making the same gestures and decisions, even when you are in a new place, or when you return to an old place and find everything changed.

Have you seen the round pit of bare rock on the west slope past your village where that little creek cuts through? Your father scooped it out. That was what he sent me back with. I keep that letter on my person always. I feel I need to return to that piece of slope more often these days than I did when my children were young. The grass is bent, and I imagine it is still just as warm from the heat of our bodies, lying side by side, saying goodbye.

I have no doubt that my daughter will attempt what I did. It is not my place to interfere with that choice. But please, if you send her back, or forward, send her with thoughts that are happier than sad. She has a particular affection for beetles. Perhaps distract her with one of those as you send her away. The feelings that linger when we reemerge from the envelopes are the ones we entered with, and I would not have her feel as bereft as I did when I came home.

Kavita

*

December 30, —32

My dear Mr. Chappalwala,

When I was thirteen, I came down with a case of chicken pox so severe I had to sleep in an armchair at night, so afraid was I of turning over in bed, popping open my skin in the process. My father, not normally given to demonstrations of affection, came into my room one evening waving a letter.

“From Mr. Chappalwala,” he said, referring, of course, to your father. He crouched by my chair and opened the envelope, releasing a flock of river ducks into the room. I watched them fly back and forth over the floor, their webbed feet grazing the silk carpet, clawing for water.

My father told me the river ducks came from Chiang Rai. He told me your father, old Chappalwala, had stood on the bank where the Mekong met the Ruak, where Thailand, Laos, and

Myanmar rubbed flanks like slumbering lizards. The sun rose over Laos, and the birds emerged from the reeds in Myanmar and flew straight across the watery confluence to Thailand. They flew right into your father's arms—he had an envelope stretched open, at the ready.

I often thought about those ducks from Chiang Rai. Were they not in fact Burmese river ducks—and of course, back then, it *was* Burma—paying a visit to Thailand? But then again, who was to say they were not seasonal birds, migrating from farther north or south, sojourning in the waters of the Golden Triangle before continuing elsewhere? And still, perhaps they were Laotian river ducks, for when they flew out of that envelope, their backs still flashed with bronze coins of sunrise, Laotian sunrise, and surely no one can argue with the sun's claim upon a creature, that soft light burned into its flesh.

Years passed, my father died, and the letter was misplaced—I believe stolen by one of the staff. I had long since given up any pretensions I could run the Mongerji house as my father had. I felt porous with lost memories. On the anniversary of my father's death, I wrote to old Chappalwala, begging him to return to Chiang Rai for more river ducks.

He was gone a month before a letter arrived. He explained that Chiang Rai had greatly changed. From his old spot, where the Mekong and Ruak converged, he could see the lurching frame of a casino, half built, for tourists to Laos. He himself had spent an informative couple of hours in the museum built on the Thai side of the Golden Triangle, documenting the migration routes of ancient opium traders.

Old Chappalwala befriended a woodworker, a small, middle-aged man who plied his trade under the corrugated tin awning of a shop with only three walls. The man claimed it was good business, selling scrap-wood sculptures to tourists wandering out of the museum, the new hotel, the river dock. Chappalwala said the woodworker remembered the river ducks from when

he was young. He said they flew so thick across the water that its surface churned into foam. He said the last time he had seen a river duck was five years ago in an old woman's garden, a string tied to its foot and fastened to a mulberry bush.

I could not believe it. I crumpled your father's letter and flung it across the room. In desperation I picked up the envelope, its corners pulpy as cloth from travel, pried it open, and turned it over. A number of small objects rattled out. I picked one up. A duck, carved from pale yellow wood. Attached to its tail was a pin with a rotating bead, three chicken feathers stuck into the bead like the blades of a propeller. To be hung in an open window, I suppose, so the wind would catch the feathers and make them turn. There were fifty wooden ducks in all. I enclose one in this letter, for you.

I wonder, my dear young friend, if you might make the journey your father made. You are on the other side of the world, I know, but I am an old man now, more porous than ever. Could you find me the old woodworker? Could you send him to me? I am curious about him. I wonder, when he was a boy, whether he ever noticed, beneath the sunlight's dapples, what color the river ducks' back feathers were. I no longer remember.

Yours in earnest,

Mr. Mongerji

*

March 27, —33

Mr. F. Chappalwala,

You have no doubt heard, by now, of my late father's passing, since at least one of my siblings writes to you quite frequently. I have no comment on what the other one does, or even where she is. I wonder if she even knows our father is dead.

I will be brief, as others in my family have not been. As new head of the Mongerji line, I hereby dissolve the contract between my family and the Chappalwalas. We have no need for your work, as the collection we have amassed no longer carries the currency it once did. I thank your family for their generations of service to us.

On a personal note, do I ask for too much if I request that you cease communications with what remains of my family? They are far too much in thrall with acquisition—as if collecting pieces of the world will help them understand their place in it better. They would do better to be released from the influence of your letters. It seems when you are not peddling plants and animals you fleece false hopes. No more, please. Let us be.

Sincerely,

R. Mongerji

*

June 15, —33

Dear Farshad-bhaiya,

Please find enclosed the latest of the Mongerji collection, the last of what remained in the house. Tomorrow I join work for the first time with my brother. It will be a while before I have access to the collection archived within the museum, but I am letting you know now so you can remain on standby. The museum will not be long in discovering what I plan to do. Expect one or two fat manila envelopes, and when you receive them, please clear a wide berth around you and open the flaps of the envelopes *away* from your body.

I almost wish I could be there to see the explosion. All the collection—hundreds and hundreds of years of hard work, so many yellowed envelopes. It makes me chuckle even now.

I have been meaning to ask you—how strong are your muscles? Before Jayu-dhidhi left, she put a whole rat into a letter, and I watched her heave the slim sheet of paper to the mailbox like it was attached to a dragnet filled with whales. It must be so much effort to consider and consider and consider every minuscule little detail of the creatures you capture, to hold all of their intricacies so they stay intact on their journeys. Dhidhi told me things about the rat I would never have known—about the dirt caught between the grooves of its nails, the microfauna within its guts. She said the last thing the rat had eaten was the stub of a pear, and its stem. She said it took her five hours of considering to figure that out.

I cannot imagine how heavy the rest of the collection is, and would appreciate any advice you have to offer. If the deliveries are successful, Ammi has agreed to send me to where you and Dhidhi are, though I think Dhidhi must be off somewhere else again—she could never stay still. I asked if Ammi would want to come with me, but she says she has a letter of her own, and will be quite satisfied with where it takes her.

Meanwhile, the next time Dhidhi breezes through to post something, would you tell her to stop? I really like the beetles she's been sending, but the whole point is to return them now, isn't it? When I leave, I want to travel light, and I have beetles from twenty different places in my pocket already—my wallet almost won't close. Just tell her to describe them to me next time.

Thank you,

Abhi

MR. THANASEWI'S SIGHT-SEE-ATORIUM

Of course, the rain starts at two.

Your wife, vindicated, snaps open the hotel umbrella clamped to her armpit and raises the orange dome over her head with the solemnity of a flag-hoister. The street is deserted, the buildings hushed. She peers up from under the umbrella at the roof of what she has stopped in front of. There are so many temples here, you think, walking past her. This one is shingled with green petals, and as the dots of rain quickly overlap themselves the whole roof glistens darkly.

—Like a dragon under moss, she says to your retreating back.

You stop at a crossroads with your hands arranged lightly in your pockets. You are wearing a quiet blue sweater over an eggshell shirt, pressed grey trousers, and buffed leather shoes the color of milky tea. You glance casually at the buildings, tilt your body lightly right and left so you can consider the roads branching neither east nor west but at a diagonal, nod gently at the street signs written in Thai, which you cannot read, and casually shake your head, as if you are not lost, merely relocating. As the rain pelts the top of your bare head, the scalp turns shiny, dark as a river stone.

Your wife is walking up to you. She is a Technicolor lollypop airdropped into Chiang Mai from an Air India plane. You pride yourself you have never looked like a tourist, model your clothes and travel destinations on the stories of your international business associates, and carry a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and a slim, watertight box of business cards in your pockets at all times, ready to strike up conversation with strangers. Your wife, meanwhile, is a mobile bastion of homeliness. She is wearing her walking shoes—white tennis sneakers—under a green salwaar khameez ensemble which she insists, despite living twenty years abroad, is still more comfortable to her than skirts or slacks. Over this she has pulled on a sweatshirt emblazoned

Arizona MOM, and now she is crowned with that umbrella from the hotel, that lurid, iconic orange. It is a trifecta of sartorial geopositioning, declaring to the world where she is from, where she raised your son, and where she resides this vacation, your first alone since your marriage, since your son became an adult.

Nevertheless, when she raises the umbrella, you duck under it.

—Well?

—I can't find the mountain range, you reply.

—What was it you explained to me? The Mae Kok River is the compass north, the mountain range is west, and Chiang Mai City is your oyster.

You grimace at your wife's singsong mockery and consider whether to turn back. Your boss's voice slurs in your ear—It'll be a hell of a traveler's tale, Varun, she said as you left her car. —What Mr. Thanasewi's doing in that building isn't even legal yet.

Your wife digs into the neck of her sweatshirt, fishes out a handkerchief held under a bra-strap, and begins patting the top of your head dry.

—You're going to thank me for this, you say, pulling her by the stem of the umbrella through the rain, along the road branching to your right.

She glances at her watch. You know she is timing how long it will be before she shoves the umbrella into your hands so she is free to hail a tuk-tuk back to the hotel. She marches in step with you, possibly oblivious to puddles, possibly slamming her feet heavily into them on purpose, and you bemoan the speckles of dirt splashed up from the pavement onto your shoes. You will not admit she was right in her criticism of footwear for this day.

At the next crossroads, even as your shoulders sag, even as you feel your wife bristle beside you, you see it. The house on the corner. Maroon shingles. A wrought iron gate. A small,

olive-green sign declares in English, Mr. Thanasewi's Sight-See-Atorium. No tourist guide could have led you to this place. It was a secret passed to you because you were judged to have the stomach for it.

You drag your wife across the street and push through the gate. Beyond, a garden sags in the rain, leading to the house, tall, two-storeyed, its roof front peaked with the traditional wing-like ornamentation that your wife still thinks looks like crossed eyebrows—Don't you see the dragon-face, she says once again.

—Silly exoticization, you mutter to yourself.

She grips your elbow as you lead her to the front door of Mr. Thanasewi's. The pathway is studded on both sides with large terracotta frogs. They have gaping mouths, from which plants creep out like feathery tongues. The rain has made the frogs' eyes shiny. The house rattles with bamboo wind chimes. Your wife is shaking her head. You knock on the door. Ring on the bell.

—I'm not sure about this place, she whispers.

—Close that stupid umbrella.

She shakes it vigorously first, and a drop of water hits the back of your neck.

Just as you are about to ring the bell again, it is flung open by small man wearing large glasses. He gleams.

—Sawadikrap, he says to you. He turns to your wife. —Sawadika!

The atrium inside Mr. Thanasewi's establishment is a collection of potted plants and posters of more plants, botanical illustrations. Two arched doorways branch off to either side, and stairways lead up and downstairs. Mr. Thanasewi directs your attention to a small table nestled within the plants to the side of the front door.

—Brochures, he explains, for the tour of the museum. He pats at a black box with a slot in the middle. —Your humble donations, he adds. He holds up a fat book, smiling. —And don't forget to sign the guestbook after tour. Most important. You are Indian, yes? Good, good. I am collecting languages here. Greetings and thank yous in all languages. I have German, Dutch, English, Russian—

—I can do French, you offer.

—French, he says, Mandarin, Thai, but no Indian languages. What languages do you speak?

You shake your head. Your wife, who was crouched behind you unlacing and taking off her shoes, straightens up. —Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, she says.

You frown at her bare feet. She nods at Mr. Thanasewi's, that you now see, under his too-short pants, are also bare.

—What sort of museum is this? you ask, fisting a wad of bahts into Mr. Thanasewi's donations box.

—Kapunkrap, he replies, bowing slightly. He hands you each a brochure and rushes through an archway. —Come, come, I will explain it all.

Your wife makes a deploring face.

You promised you wouldn't complain, you say with raised eyebrows. You promised you would do things my way. She clicks her tongue at you and disappears after Mr. Thanasewi.

Abandoned in the atrium, you let loose a sigh and flip through the guestbook. A Mr. López Echeverría visited last week. —Gracias, he says, and presumably goes on to highlight the wonders of the sight-see-atorium, for every other sentence is framed by exclamation marks. A few pages over Arabic runs right to left. A Dr. and Mrs. Burton write in loose loops that they

believe Mr. Thanasewi's experiments are a revolution. —Godspeed, they say. —Mum's the word, they add. It seems, for all its obscurity, more tourists have been through Mr. Thanasewi's establishment than you would have guessed. A Frenchman from five years ago declares *que vous jouez avec un cauchemar*.

This entire vacation, you think, has been a nightmare. A protracted reenactment of domestic irritations. Once upon a time, business trips unspooled into journeys of self-discovery. Up-mountain walks in fog-thick air before sunrise. That was in Costa Rica. The numb silence of a rooftop in Nairobi during a power outage, stars like lead weights descending from the dark. You understood then that there was no need for gods, if you had the weight of another person's arm, the reassuring press of a knee, the gathering of surprise in a clutched wrist. In Singapore you remember the peal of your first mistress's laughter, tired, conveying in bubbled breath that people are meant to cross paths like flocked birds, separating when their nesting grounds appeared. The only antidote for such discoveries is the hunt for more, boomerang escapes from home.

Your wife's voice trickles back into the atrium, murmuring observations. Mr. Thanasewi's voice is breathless. From here it sounds like he finds her charming.

Mr. Thanasewi collects more than languages. This is a room full of glass-fronted cabinets. They line the walls, jutter like hedgerows in a tall maze, and the room smells of leafy decay. Threadbare ottomans dot the spaces between the cabinets. At the far end of the room is a fainting couch. —These cabinets, Mr. Thanasewi's brochure indicates, are from my adventures in the tropics. While my dear wife, Dr. Thanasewi, conducted her research, I visited the forests in search of my own wonders.

The first aisles of cabinets hold hundreds of thousands of insects pierced through by gold-headed pins. You recognize the butterflies and moths, a comforting tableau of open-palmed beauties, but you are impatient for novelty. Mr. Thanasewi's beetles are better. Some are small, iridescent dewdrops. Others look like they are made from wax or powdery soap, implausibly pastel. There are unremarkable earth-colored creatures festooned with antennae like feathers, others with antlers. Some beetles are the size of noses, others large as fists, the color of tar.

Your brochure gleefully states, —My friends, it is my belief that by identifying every beetle found on earth, we will have recited every name by which we may know God.

The next is an aisle full of grasshoppers and termites. And a terrarium filled with live cockroaches. You cannot be sure if the whisper you hear is the rustle of insects or the rain outside. The inside of the terrarium is a shiver of brown, flecked with purple and blue. You never noticed this before, that cockroaches had same oil-slick colors of peacocks, against the dull brown.

—Friends, Mr. Thanasewi's brochure says, before you turn away, consider! A cockroach mother does not shy from her children. Should you?

A sealed jar on top of the terrarium holds yellow liquid, in which a fat cockroach is suspended. You pick it up. Gently swirl the glass.

Laughter. Your wife is enjoying herself, somewhere in the depths of this bizarre museum. This is not what you expected. You remember, after your marriage, bringing her back to your first home, tucked into a condominium complex at the edge of the university. She had wanted a shower after the flight. While you made yourself a drink she tinkered with the taps. You dropped and chipped the glass when you heard her shriek. You remember yellow. The linoleum. The shower curtain. Bathroom walls. The first glimpse of your naked wife, pressed up against the

bathroom walls. The light bulb flickering. A shampoo bottle, incongruously purple on the yellow-lit floor of the bathtub. A smear underneath, and the broken wing of a cockroach, also yellow. Neither of you moved to clean up the mess. You looked each other up and down, eyes like rakes. You couldn't hold back the face you made. Instead of hiding her body behind the shower curtain, as you expected her to, she straightened up. —What, she had said, —I didn't ask for you.

Your wife laughs again. You hold the jar up to your eyes and swill the cockroach round. Miniature, translucent cockroaches are nestled under the large one's wings. An alcohol-faded label stuck to the side of the jar reads, —Mother and seventeen nymphs, caught '78, Manipal—, but the species name is illegible, dissolved by time.

The next shelves are dedicated to flies, but these are pinned specimens again. You deflate. You were not expecting a zoo, but you did want to see more life, in this strange museum that your boss so highly praised.

The flies do, at least, rival the beetles in their variety. There are ones with eyes like berries on sticks. Many have painted wings, tea-toned stained glass. Some have chubby legs, others spindles. Some have the menacing colors of wasps, others are placid as bumblebees in fur coats. You shiver. Even though the flies are pinned in solemn rows, their legs and wings seem slightly unfiltered. As if, while your head was turned, they twitched in slumbered discomfort.

A poster on a wall shows a dissected horse fly under high magnification. Its decapitated head is a warrior's mask, giant brown eyes like a visor, mouthparts serrated sabers. Arrows depict how the mouth scissor-snips, to carve out pieces of flesh. The wings and legs have been

pulled off, and the hind right leg is taken apart into its component pieces, twigs, knuckles, barbs. The abdomen has a clean slit running down the middle, the innards a confusing yellow jumble.

The chest cavity, from which the legs and wings once sprouted, is also split down the middle, and the thick shell pried open. Inside is white muscle, layer upon layer stacked and bunched, thick as biceps or glutes. An arrow indicates that these powerful muscles operate the wings, allowing the horse fly unmatched maneuverability and speed.

—Good eating, you mumble to yourself, remembering this morning’s chicken breast for lunch at the hotel. Twenty years and your wife still rolled her eyes when you ate meat. She still would not prepare it in the house.

You find a microscope near the poster. A dark wooden box of glass slides. Mr. Thanasewi’s brochure instructs you to peruse through the numerous frozen samples of human parasites borne by flies. A diagram propped up behind the microscope illustrates in line drawings the passage of dysentery from trash midden to man via fly. A dead fish on top of the trash heap is dotted with contaminants. They attract a fly, which sits on the fish. Its feet and tongue turn dotted. An arrow points to the fly’s next destination, an apple on a tree—dot dot dot. Meanwhile, a bald, mustachioed man in a loincloth lifts a barbell. An arrow points him toward lunch. He picks the contaminated apple off the tree. He does not wash it before biting in. He wipes his mouth clean, but his lips are now dotted. When he returns to his barbell, he cannot lift it. At the end of this bizarre pantomime the arrow points to the man collapsed on the floor, stomach in dots, mouth frozen mid-gag.

—Are you enjoying yourself, Mr. Khatwani?

You spin around to face Mr. Thanasewi, showing your hands back into your pockets. In your absentmindedness you had been rubbing your lips with your fingers, and now feel an urge to lick them clean of invisible dots. You bite your tongue to resist.

—This is an eclectic collection, you finally say. You fumble in your pockets. There are only cigarettes and business cards, no handkerchief.

—Kapunkrap, Mr. Thanasewi says. —Your wife has been telling me all about America. He beckons at you, points to the cabinets beyond.

—Has she been telling you how much she hates it and would like to return home?

—No, no, indeed, Mr. Thanasewi gushes. He waves his hands at the cabinets to the left and right, but shuffles ahead. —She tells me about your work. About the muscle growth in cows. Tell me, is it strange to make a food you are not allowed to eat?

You laugh. —Mr. Thanasewi, when your stomach begins to eat itself from hunger, you do not ask whether you are allowed to eat meat or milk.

You clear your throat deliberately and step into another aisle between cabinets. You hear Mr. Thanasewi's feet shuffle back to retrieve you. The shelves here are filled with lumps of rock, a geometry of minerals sprouting from them. The crystal facets wink weakly in the dull light coming through the windows. The sky is overcast still. The brochure says, —Never forget the treasures of the earth.

You stand before slender glass columns from floor to ceiling, layered with gravel and mud.

—Samples, Mr. Thanasewi says, from my travels. He gestures at a cylinder of red soil, fading to a chalky pink at the bottom. He stands on his toes and points to the top of the column, a line of dark brown. —This is—

—the layer that plants get their food from, yes, you say.

—from the very forests outside the city, Mr. Thanasewi finishes. His heels touch the floor again and he gives you a sideways look. —Your wife tells me you are very learned. Always looking for something new. Come. I will show you the most new thing in my sight-see-atorium. Only special guests can see.

You pass aisles of taxidermied animals. Paintings. Potsherds. Mr. Thanasewi stops suddenly and points to a cabinet set off from the others, with an ottoman placed directly in front of it. Inside, a set of khaki pants and shirt look like they have been stitched entirely from pockets. A straw hat veiled with a mosquito net hangs above the ensemble. On the floor of the cabinet are sturdy rubber boots with thick treads. An assortment of laboratory glassware and microscopes is arranged on small shelves and the back of the cabinet is painted like a marshland.

—It's like the portrait of a ghost, you say.

Mr. Thanasewi chews his lip. —Indeed.

He hurries you forward.

—I have paid, Mr. Thanasewi, you remind him. —Perhaps you would let me explore.

—Best thing, Mr. Khatwani, is inside, downstairs, basement.

You shake your head, but follow. The brochure, full of its quizzical observations, is the best story you will have all day, the only fodder for laughter with your friends back home.

Your wife is standing by the fainting couch. She holds in her hands something large and round. When she looks up at you, her eyes are shiny. She offers you the object. It looks like a terracotta pot without a mouth, just a dimple on top where the hole should have been. From the way she is holding it, you guess it is fairly heavy, perhaps solid all the way through. Its surface is finely textured, like a matte glaze was applied to it in fine brushstrokes.

It feels coarse, hairy.

—It's a bezoar, she whispers.

You shrug.

She explains, —A ball of hair from the stomach of a cow.

Your face contorts. Mr. Thanasewi grabs the bezoar from you before you drop it.

Your wife threads her arm through yours and leads you to a doorway. —Mr. Thanasewi told me this cow was forced to have many babies, she says. —Many more than natural.

Mr. Thanasewi opens the door and descends a stairway. Your wife's voice echoes. —And this cow, she licked and licked each of her babies clean, when they came. And every few months her calf would be taken away and she would have to give birth to another. Again and again until suddenly—

—she die, Mr. Thanasewi says. He has stopped in front of a heavy metal door. —
Obstruction of the intestine. He shakes his head.

You untangle your arm from your wife's. —That's ghastly, you say. You reach into your pockets and pull out the lighter and cigarettes.

Mr. Thanasewi jumps as you proffer him one. —No, no, very dangerous, he says, and grabs at your hand with both of his. He takes away your lighter and runs up the stairs to place it on the upstairs landing.

Your wife is shaking her head at you. Under her breath, she says, —Aur jhoothay-bhi nahein uttara.

You look down at your shoes and shrug. —My father lived till ninety three, you say to Mr. Thanasewi, who is running his hands over his face as he descends the stairs again. —
Smoked every day of his life.

—I must ask you both to empty your pockets and leave the items on the stairs, please. Inside, it's dangerous to have flammable things. Eatable things. No bags also, please, he says to your wife.

—What on earth do you keep in here? you ask, as Mr. Thanasewi heaves with all his weight upon the handle of the metal door.

—A revolution, he replies, swinging the door open to reveal an airlock.

An overpowering smell of yeast, even through the mask covering your nose and mouth. That is what is most surprising, you think faintly, of all the surprises of today. That organic smell, in this place. Every footstep clangs—the floor, walls, and ceiling are steel. The light is clinical. The back wall is inset with another heavy metal door—another airlock. In here there are two steel tables protruding from the walls, two steel benches. The walls are lined with recessed metal drawers. Mr. Thanasewi, also masked, bends to read from the little labels affixed to each drawer.

You turn to look at your wife, standing against the second door of the airlock. Her eyes are wide. Her mask moves on her face as if she is chewing on the mouthpiece. Her arms are crossed tightly to her chest and she will not step further into the room.

Tubes snake from each of your mouthpieces to a set of tanks on a wheeled trolley in the center of the room. —To prevent oxygen poisoning, Mr. Thanasewi had said, by way of explanation. You nodded politely. What else was there to say?

Mr. Thanasewi's eyes, behind his glasses, are gleaming. —I, too, he says, voice nasally distorted by the mask, am an animal breeder. Except, I am trying something—he pauses and stares at the ceiling for the right word—unconventional. Mrs. Khatwani, never fear, there is nothing at all in here that can harm you.

Your wife startles and nods. Her eyes crease like she is trying to smile behind the mask.

—Remember, Mr. Thanasewi continues to address her, —how I showed you all the various mouth parts under the microscope? I am only breeding adults with no mouths, so they cause no harm.

Your wife nods again.

Mr. Thanasewi pulls open a drawer, revealing a tray lined with dates. He picks one up and crosses the room to your wife. —See, he says, —no harm, no harm. The high oxygen here lets them grow big. Much bigger. This batch is only medium grade.

You stroll toward the open drawer. Not dates. You tilt your head to get a closer looker. They are as large as plums, shaped like unripe pinecones covered in leather. They look vaguely familiar, and as you bend over them you realize that something pulses under the shell-like outer covering. There is an empty shell here, pale brown, split at the wider end. You pick it up and flex the ragged flaps around the opening. It is pliant but tough, like a fingernail.

You look around for Mr. Thanasewi. His hands are cupped around your wife's and he is pointing with a thumb at what she is holding. You clear your throat to ask, —Mr. Thanasewi, is this—but your question is answered by the sudden thrum of wings. Something zips past your ear. You drop the shell and clap your hands to your mouth because the room is alive now with the drone of the creature spinning about the ceiling, blue-green, the flash of a red head, not a hummingbird.

Mr. Thanasewi curses. —Never fear, never fear, he says, flapping his hands at you. — Stay still.

Your wife is rigid, her eyes racing round the ceiling with the creature, which suddenly dives and settles on her arm. Her face whitens, and from her mouthpiece emerges the rushed

words—Hai-Ram, hai-Ram, hai-Ram, rising to panic pitch, as the fly, large as a plum, makes its way up her arm.

The other doorway off the atrium to Mr. Thanasewi's Sight-See-Atorium leads to a dining room. You look around it as if expecting the woodwork to come alive. Everything is resolutely still. Mr. Thanasewi—after cupping the fly in his hands with cooing sounds and putting it back in its drawer, after guiding your wife out of the metal room, up through the house, and into the chair at the head of the dining table—disappeared upstairs to rouse someone. There are now busy sounds coming from the kitchen.

Your wife holds her handkerchief to her head. It is soaked in mentholated oils from a small bottle she carries in her purse. Her chin rests in her hand.

—You alright?

—Tell Mr. Thanasewi we are vegetarian, she says to you. —Tell him now before he brings out the food, please.

—Don't be rude, you respond. —He has generously offered us dinner.

Mr. Thanasewi returns, all smiles. —Mrs. Khatwani, you will have hot soup? Revive yourself, now that the shock is over? Main course?

Your wife breathes deeply from her handkerchief. —I do not eat meat, she says to him, looking at you. —I am sorry. Just hot water?

He nods. —With a lemon?

You smile widely when he turns to you. —Mr. Thanasewi, you say, I am your guest.

Mr. Thanasewi calls through to the kitchen and then sits across from you, patting your wife's arm. —You did very well, Mrs. Khatwani, he says, —very well.

—You have a lot of people faint in that room, you ask.

Mr. Thanasewi shakes his head. —That early emergence was unusual, he says. —I usually bring out one of the trained ones instead. She will just perch, he mimes with a fist on an outstretched palm. He gestures around his glasses. —With those big eyes, she's just very cute.

You are the strangest man I have ever met, you think.

A young woman emerges from kitchen bearing a tray. She sets down tea for your wife, and two bowls of soup.

—Ah, you say, —this must be Dr. Thanasewi, yes?

Your wife clicks her tongue at you. —Mr. Thanasewi is a widower. That is his daughter, she hisses, gesturing at the retreating girl.

Mr. Thanasewi nods.

Your wife turns to him, asks, —Will your daughter also study insect-borne diseases?

—I do not have room in my house for one more portrait of a ghost, he whispers.

You sip your soup in silence. It is hot and savory. —Delicious, you finally say.

—Kapunkrap.

—So, you continue, pushing away your empty bowl. —A good market for pets then, your revolution? Novelty pets. Thailand has a lucrative trade in exotic plants.

Mr. Thanasewi stirs his untouched soup. —No, Mr. Khatwani, unfortunately, these animals would die immediately outside the airlocks. Not enough oxygen.

—Perhaps mounted, then? you suggest, nodding at the large display room across the atrium. —You have some beautiful traditional-sized specimens.

Mr. Thanasewi's daughter has reemerged. She sets down two plates, large crab shells cracked open.

—Ah, you say, —how wonderful.

Mr. Thanasewi asks your wife, —Will you not eat anything?

She says no.

—My wife has never been adventurous, you explain. —You know, I was almost afraid to take her on holiday with me?

You pick up your fork and knife and pry apart the cracked shell. The meat inside is white, stacked and bunched muscle. You look up, your hands hovering over your plate.

Your wife raises her eyebrows, as if to say, Don't be rude.

And Mr. Thanasewi, mouth full, smiles and tells you, —Eat, my friend, eat.

DAL LAKE

When my father tells this story, it's as if it's his five-year honeymoon. He says until then he was not quite sure what his purpose was. He says he fed me tindli-curry sandwiches and hot rose-milk because I was a sickly, fussy child, and wouldn't eat anything else. He holds his fingers apart to show how he tore the bread into bite-size pieces for a child.

We stayed in a hotel-boat, docked by the lakeside. He says he carried me from window to window to watch the sun rise in threads through wooden latticework. We rode horses through the mountains, and I asked to ride the palomino horse, "The pink one," and wept on the day it was hired to someone else. He says we would have stayed a week, but someone threw a rock at our car, and we had to leave.

My mother says it was pebbles. She says she will never forget the sound, like fire crackers. She was in the back seat of the car, with me and the tour guide's daughter. She says she tugged both of us into her lap and bent over, and she remembers my father's hand flung out behind him, touching her hair.

She insists it was not their five-year honeymoon. She says they never even had a zero-year honeymoon, and how could they celebrate with a child in their midst, when rocks were being thrown at them? She says those five nights she never slept, watched me and my father breathe, strained her ears against the sound of water lapping round the hotel-boat for the faintest hint of discord, for gunfire. She stroked my hair, she says, to keep calm.

My father says, "Do you not remember, we saw snow for the first time?"

My mother says, "The tour guide's name was Mr. Zuhair. Sameera, his daughter, said she would be your big-sister for the week."

"I thought it would be safe enough," my father says.

“Mr. Zuhair was a widower,” my mother says.

“On our last day, before the rock, Mr. Zuhair arrived at the hotel with Sameera to take us out in a wooden shikara to the narrowest part of Dal Lake,” my father says, pinching his fingers together.

“None of us could swim, Mr. Zuhair found out, but the water was flat, still as sky.”

My mother shows me a photograph Mr. Zuhair took of my parents. They are lying against the big red cushions lining the stern, smiles stretched across their cheeks. Their shoulders do not touch, nor their thighs. The sun hangs above like a fruit. White mountains rise around them, cupping blue water, brown boat.

I remember Sameera pulling me to the prow, past Mr. Zuhair, idling with the oar, the camera hung loosely from the other hand.

“Look,” she said.

She leaned over the edge and dipped her palm into the water. Ripples slid over her wrist for a moment and then she scooped back her hand, held it out to me. Cupped within was a tiny silver fish.

When I tell this story, Kashmir becomes that fish, my every memory swirling back to that shiny thing, puddled in another child’s hand.

I remember wanting to catch one of my own, leaning over the side of the shikara, ladling and ladling the water. The fish swam through my fingers like needles, over and under, right through.

THE MAAMI-KILLERS

Listen, ma, we have only one rule: shhhhh. We know how you feel. Nobody really talked to you about this stuff, and neither will we, but we're good listeners and brilliant mind readers—better even than gods that way. And you've heard our reputation, sure enough. Bombay, the city of sounds, is full of half-choked whispers and well-drowned dreams and we are the smog that weaves right through it. We have a knack for listening to unspoken thoughts. One of our people shows up at your house you won't even know it but we get the job done, just as you imagined.

We saw you upstairs, at the Gopalans'. You went to their funeral service, we know. Aiyo, that wailing, it can really get you down, naa? But we know that look in your eye, watching the girls, watching the boys—there are some in that room that are relieved. You are searching their eyes and when you see their relief your lips shut like an oyster shell and your cheeks flicker like you're tossing some irritating grain of sand around in your mouth. You're thinking, if only it were your mother-in-law who had died, like this. We understand, ma. We know what you need.

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Do you like your new house? Of course, we already know the answer. You miss your parents' home, don't you? Your parents' home, in Coimbatour, with the rooms arranged around the open courtyard. The walls were painted swimming pool-blue and every afternoon in the rain season you heard the yelping of peacocks in the distant trees. You helped your Amma hang laundry across the blue balconies over the courtyard and followed your Appa in the garden, holding a basket that he filled with guavas and pepper.

Your husband's house is not like that. In college you said you didn't mind moving to Bombay with him. Understandable, ma. Deepak's hands are always soft and warm and when he laughs it reminds you of water gushing from a faucet. Your Appa said, "Your husband, your

choice,” and your Amma said, “You marry not just the man, but the family,” and you weigh this counsel seriously until Deepak clasps your hand in his and tugs lightly, “So?” When you first meet Deepak’s father, Balan, you think that the men share the same gentle voice, like it has been divided neatly between them. And when his mother, Shanta, rushes into your parents’ blue house in greeting, you realize Deepak is built like her, thin limbs supporting a heavy torso. Shanta asks you voracious questions, bobbing on her feet like a sparrow, and you answer everything because you think she must mean well.

In Bombay, the smog hangs low over the electric lines, and car engines rattle the air. Your new home is in the middle of the city. Udhay Apartments is surrounded on all sides by other buildings, and Deepak and his parents live on the first floor, so low that the dawn light after which the building is named never shines through the windows, even though the house is on the east. Inside this house the walls are the color of teeth. Some days after your marriage, when Shanta asks if you like your new bedroom and you shyly ask if you could paint the walls another color, her cheeks deflate as she sucks her breath in.

“Twenty-three years I’ve lived here, you come stay three nights and already you want to redecorate?”

You look around for someone else to interject but Deepak is already leaving with Balan, identical leather briefcases and shoes polished to match. That afternoon, while Shanta takes a nap, whistling delicate snores, you examine the letterboxes on the ground floor of the building, reading the names of the tenants. There are three floors in this building, four families on each floor. There you are, care of B. Murugan and D. Balan, your father-in-law and your husband’s names stenciled in white upon black. What a strange thing, you think, that our men give their first names to their wives to carry while they shoulder their father’s names for themselves. You

wonder if you had become Dr. V. Deepak whether you could have declared your presence on this mailbox too. We also wonder about this.

Your eyes are drawn to the only other Tamil-karaans on the letterboxes. G. Seetharaman & Sons, it says. You are sure the house above your own is not a shop, but you are curious about this family nonetheless, whether an army of fathers and sons pound down the stairs each morning, how many women they leave behind to wash up.

That evening, the army descends to pay your new family their wedding respects. Shanta calls you into the living room and gestures, “Make the Gopalans some tea, ma,” and you catch a glimpse of them all lined up on the sofa. It is only two young men and their cheek-less father and their broad-hipped mother, and you then-and-there decide you have nothing in common with them. Gopalan pronounces to your father-in-law, “She is a fine addition to the family, Balan,” and when Deepak laughs you think you have nothing in common with his family either.

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We know you are curious, so, here’s how it worked with the Gopalans upstairs. Here’s their geneology, ok? Shri Gopalan Seetharaman weds Shrimathi Mahalaxmi Muthusaami. Mahalaxmi Gopalan then delivers two boys, Ramu Gopalan and Munna Gopalan, two years apart. Ramu and Munna have grown up names but nobody calls them that except their classmates, and, frankly, the classmates don’t count.

Ramu, who early developed his pot-bellied physique, fancies himself a Romeo. He used to part his hair down the left with Brylcreem until a flash of inspiration in grade eleven persuaded him to take his comb down the right lane instead. He is a trendsetter, naa? He is the pearls and diamonds in his mother’s eyes.

Munna is not so elegant. He is thin, like his father, and at fourteen he shoots up like one of those runnerbean plants, his legs and arms as bendy as rubber. The house doesn't seem big enough for him, and Mahalaxmi every month circles the boy going, "Tchi, tchi, tchi!" while she measures his legs for a new fitting. For Ramu, it was easy—she just put an elastic band in his pants. For Munna, she finally makes trousers two feet longer than his legs with the cuffs rolled up tightly, like he's smuggling beedis down there. "Next time," she says to him, "you just take these threads out, roll down the cuffs and restitch, ok?"

Ramu goes to Calcutta for college. Computer engineering, just like you, but one year later. Mahalaxmi is at a loss what to do after this. "The house is too empty," she hisses to Gopalan each night. She prods him in the buttock and he twitches. "The house is all empty and it's all your fault," she says. "Who told you to send my boy away to study? There are no good schools over here or what?"

A month after Ramu's departure, Gopalan enters the boys' shared bedroom, puts his hand on Munna's shoulder and whispers, "I think you should invite some friends over some time. Give your Amma some distraction."

Munna brings Latha home for dinner next Friday. She is his chemistry lab partner. Their first day of lab Munna got nervous and overtwisted the tap of the burette she was filling from the top. The tip snapped and clear liquid began spurting out the tube and Latha immediately jammed the jagged tip with her thumb. As the chemistry teacher bustled around for a replacement, Munna nodded at her hand, which was clutched around the base of the burette, and said, "What if that was acid in there?"

"Don't be stupid. Mrs. Hafiz wouldn't give us acid on our first day."

Mahalaxmi likes Latha too. She says, “Come, come, I made that upma you liked last week.” She bustles around in the kitchen while Munna and Latha take seats around the checkered murphy-table. Munna’s legs, like a perched grasshopper, bang the underside of the table. Every so often they brush Latha’s knees and she smiles at him, her eyes catching the light reflected off the stainless steel plates from the tubelight flickering overhead.

“Big treat next week,” Mahalaxmi says in December as she puts steaming chapattis on their plates, “My big boy comes home for holidays. Give me your telephone number, Latha, I will call your whole family over. We’ll have a nice party.”

Ramu combs his hair straight back these days, with no part. When he comes home Munna nods at him and returns to his homework. “Amma has been cooking for you for three days,” he says into his notebook.

Mahalaxmi has high expectations for the party. She invites Gopalan’s sister, Nalini, and her husband, Girish, because they live on the other side of the city, and it is a chance for family gossip. Your future in-laws are invited too—at this time Deepak is in Coimbatour studying for his final year mechanical exams and he has thrice held your hand and asked, “So?” Of course, Shanta and Balan know nothing of Deepak’s plans, and Shanta these days buzzes with matchmaking enthusiasm. Mahalaxmi finds her spirit inspiring as she considers her own two boys’ prospects.

After dinner everyone sits cross-legged in a circle in the living room and Gopalan emerges from the bedroom closet with five packs of cards in his hands. “Who’s for rummy?” he says.

As they play, Latha watches Munna with unblinking round eyes like a wall-lizard and says, “I’ll catch you out if you cheat, just you wait.”

Shanta tells Mahalaxmi, “So, we’re looking, again, for Deepak. Found a very promising family right here in the city.”

Mahalaxmi beams. “Excellent, excellent. I’m only waiting for Ramu to finish college so I can start too.”

“And what kind of girl would Ramu like, mmhm?” Shanta asks.

Ramu leans against his mother, smiles across the room at his brother and Latha slapping each other’s hands away from the pile of cards scattered between them. He says, “I’ll marry anyone you like, Amma, it’s only fair. You’ll be the one who spends most time with her, in the end.”

Latha’s father laughs, “Chaalaaq, chaalaaq!” and Mahalaxmi nods, also pleased with her son’s wit.

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It should not surprise you what happened next. We heard, of course, of your own marriage. Word like that gets around. And Shanta, frankly, wouldn’t shut up about it, when Deepak finally called and told her about you. Her favorite line to Mahalaxmi was, “You know, I’m just as open-minded as anything, but don’t you think I deserve some respect in exchange?”

It is worse after you move in. You start looking for jobs in the city. Deepak nods and says, “My wife has her own mind,” and Balan says nothing and reads his evening papers, and Shanta marches upstairs often to complain to Mahalaxmi about how there is so much housework to be done. “Laxmi, ma,” she says, “for us the house is enough. Feeding-cleaning-dressing the full family is our duty. But who knows what all these young people think. Want to do everything outside and nothing inside and we are left hollow, naa?”

“Kids these days,” Mahalaxmi says, glancing across the living room at her sons’ bedroom. “They take advantage of their freedom.” She says this with a mixture of smugness and regret. Ramu, the good son, is home again, his college degree securing him a place in an up-and-coming company, just as Mahalaxmi and Gopalan had hoped. She wishes Munna would have taken his example but he decided to study literature instead. She worries about his job prospects, but she will not admit this to Shanta, who guesses it anyway.

You were not Shanta’s choice for her son. She says this to all the other maamis at the wedding, and they repeat the information to their neighbors. The juicy whisper slithers through the marriage hall, blending with the rustle of silk saris. “But it’s ok, Shanta told me, because she’s a broad-minded woman,” Mahalaxmi explains to Gopalan.

Gopalan nods and scans the room for youngsters, someone with news about the India-Australia match.

You enter the Balan household around the time Munna decides to leave the Gopalan’s’. Each night is a collection of noises stitched against the darkness. They filter through the walls into your bedroom—the squawks of taxi and autorickshaw horns, the shuddering of grates pulled across windows and doors, the arguments from upstairs at the Gopalan’s’. You sometimes hear Shanta’s muffled whispers from the room next door, grunted responses from Balan.

You are sure every noise you make likewise leaks outside, from the light chink of the gold thali around your neck to the pillow’s rustle as you shift your head. When Deepak touches your cheek or shoulder you startle and hiss, “Shhhh!” Eventually, he sleeps with his arm across your chest and you are grateful, surprised, he doesn’t snore.

Three weeks after your hillstation honeymoon with Deepak, two days after you secure a job with a communications agency, you and Shanta stand in the little kitchen, negotiating

household duties. You cannot help staring at Shanta's feet, the toes splayed like a sparrow's, skinny and pale, the nails like little nodules. How did such small feet support so much weight in the hips and stomach? We wonder about this too.

Deepak even has his mother's feet, you think, as Shanta explains to you that she's very broad-minded, "But really, now that there are four people in the household, I don't think I can do all the work by myself."

You wish Deepak were here to hear this, but he and Balan left on their commute an hour ago already. Shanta says, "I don't mind you working, of course not. But now that there is one more mouth to feed and one more set of clothes to wash—and who knows what will happen after you both have children—let's think about things you can do to help me, mmhm?"

That evening, Mahalaxmi and Gopalan come downstairs to visit. You are washing the dinner plates when Shanta rushes into the kitchen, "Quickly! The Gopalan's are here. Make tea and bring some snacks."

You bring a tray of sweet tea around the circle in the living room—Gopalan and his wife first, Balan next. Shanta shoos your offering away towards Deepak before she takes the last cup. "Where is your tea, ma?" Deepak whispers as he makes room for you on the sofa between himself and Shanta.

You "tsch, tsch" that you don't want any, set the tray of Marie biscuits and salted peanuts on the table for everyone, and take your place on the sofa.

"See." Mahalaxmi points with pride to the blue paper Balan is holding. "My boy is getting married."

Balan hands you the invitation, purple ink making a border of paisley and peacocks, a Ganesha embossed in the center, and you read the curlicued script as far as, "... cordially invited. Shri Ram Mohan Gopalan weds Shrimathi Latha Krishnan..." when thunder explodes outside.

"Aiyo, the laundry," Shanta says.

Deepak tries to get up but Balan harrumps, "No, no, you just came home from work—I'll bring it down," and Shanta pinches you in the thigh. You hand the invitation back to Mahalaxmi saying, "No, Appa, sit down, you've been working too," excuse yourself, and take the laundry basket up to the roof.

The clouds are monsoon-bruised, so you hurry with taking down the clothes, dropping pegs and picking them up, and you see little blue pieces of paper skittering across the floor so you look around and notice Munna, crouched by the watering tank, his fist releasing confetti paper into the wind. You nod at him, but his face is leaden, and he does not respond to you at all.

As you go downstairs, you can make out Deepak's bubbling laughter, and when you open the door to your house Balan is slapping Gopalan's thigh saying, "Yes, congrats, congrats, Gopal." It is the most animated you have ever seen your father-in-law.

Shanta leans over and asks, "But now, you only have two bedrooms, will Ramu and Latha move into another house?"

"Absolutely not," Mahalaxmi says. "I'm not flexible like you, Shanta, I believe in joint families."

Gopalan clears his throat and explains, "Actually, Munna is moving into my sister Nalini's house. We discussed, and it is closer to his college, so—"

You take the laundry basket into the bedroom and fold clothes, the sound of the fan thrumming out the voices in the living room. When you carry the pile of your in-laws' clothes into their bedroom you hear Shanta and Mahalaxmi whispering in the kitchen.

“You have a blessed life,” Shanta says. You know she is leaning in earnest towards Mahalaxmi, bobbing on her feet, trying to read every twitch of expression. “So lucky to have obedient children, who listen to their parents instead of running around doing whatever they want. Latha is a good girl, naa? She'll be good company for you.”

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Munna does try to dhamki his way out of coming to Latha and Ramu's wedding. If you ask us, he actually had a brilliant excuse. You remember he was staying with Nalini and Girish, naa? Well, Girish's mother died, all of a sudden, while buying mangoes on the street. You can imagine the state of Girish's grief. Munna sweetly offered to be his chauffeur for the week. “Let me be helpful to you,” he said.

But Gopalan won't have any of it, sends a peon from his office to be the chauffeur, and calls his son right back. “Your Athimber and Aththai have a funeral to attend, but your place is here, with your brother,” he growls over the phone. As they enter the wedding hall that evening, he grips the back of Munna's neck and says, “Behave, that's all I'm asking from you.”

Latha never takes her eyes off her feet. Eventually the wedding photographer abandons his quest to coax up her chin. He says, “Blushing bride angle, that's the ticket. Shy, young love.” Latha's head snaps up at the last word and there is one photo of her like that, her eyes round and shining, a lizard caught in a flashlight.

On their wedding night, in bed, Ramu leans over to consider Latha's profile, outlined by moonlight. The curls of her hair are a blue cloud, her breathing short and irregular. He says,

“You must be tired. It’s been a whirlwind for all of us.” He pats her lightly on the top of the head and says, “At least you have come into a familiar house. When Amma married, she had to leave her home in Madras to join her new family. She didn’t know anybody at all.”

Latha remains still while Ramu sleeps. She can feel the soft weight of his fingers against her scalp, his shallow breath blossom and fade, blossom and fade on her shoulder, the small, oval press of his belly against her elbow, slowly growing damp from their combined sweat. Her body is on fire with these intrusions and she wants to twitch and shake and scratch them off, but she doesn’t. This is the test of her life, to control every part of her body that wants to run.

She wonders if Munna left any of his books behind. She wonders if he read his books by the window facing east, where the sun came through slivers between other people’s apartments, or the window facing north, where he could look out onto the distant cricket field, damp and potholed, in need of care. We wonder about this too.

Your life rarely intersects with Latha’s. You have more pressing concerns. You have been prodding Deepak about his dream of moving to Bangalore. “Where all the IT’s at,” you remind him of having said. When Shanta catches you having this conversation with Deepak one evening she snaps, “That’s all fine and good, but then who’s going to help Appa in the shop?”

You are insistent, and try to whisper plus points about the change of place to Deepak when you are alone, in the bedroom, with the door shut. Sometimes, amid his maybe-maybe’s, you think you hear the clink of Shanta’s thali, the swish of her nightgown, listening outside the door.

Shanta has leg cramps. Every morning and evening, before you leave for work and after you return, she asks if you will press her legs for her, because they feel so heavy. You take over her cooking duties, but she perches on a tall stool in the kitchen, watching everything you do.

She reads excerpts from her little magazines to you, about the latest accidental deaths—woman (50) pushed onto traffic in Bombay bustle, grandmother (72) has stroke in temple during a Kacheri concert, man (60) faints and falls on railway track, smacks his head, dies in coma in hospital. She relishes this kind of news. “They must have done something to deserve it,” she says with satisfaction. She looks up from the magazine and adds, “Wash between the cabbage leaves, ma, not over them.”

Deepak quietly suggests to you one night that perhaps there is too much stress, working in the house and outside, so you quit work, “Only for a short while,” you decide, while Shanta’s legs get better. You help her up the stairs to Mahalaxmi’s house, for exercise, and continue to the roof, to hang up the laundry, when you finally see Latha, six months after her marriage.

She nods at you, her face pinched, and hangs a bedsheet up before her. You watch her shadow dancing behind the cloth as she briskly pins underwear, pillowcases, blouses to the lines. She must be just over twenty, you think, and you want to ask her so many questions, but she retreats downstairs before you can clear your throat.

Shanta tells you Mahalaxmi is having the worst time of it. “The girl has a face like soured milk,” she says to you as you grip her legs, rolling your fingers into her flesh. “She never smiles, never talks. Except,” and Shanta’s eyes gleam and she props herself on her elbows to watch your expression, “when that Munna comes to visit. You know they were classmates once, don’t you? I think it’s a good thing he isn’t staying in the house. Who knows, with these young people these days, what all will tempt them, naa?”

You shrug your shoulders. It is best not to speculate, you think.

Shanta continues, “I feel sorry for Mahalaxmi, that is all. Us old maamis, it gets very hard for us, when there is no one to talk to in the house. This is why,” she sits up and grips your

shoulder and laughs, “we keep asking you when you’re going to give us grandchildren. At least then there’s something for us to do, naa?”

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In November, you find out Mahalaxmi is dead when you hear screaming from upstairs. Shanta runs up the stairs faster than you and when you enter the Gopalans’ house she is crouched beside a shrieking woman saying, “What happened, Nalini-ma, what happened?” and there you see Mahalaxmi’s body, sari and limbs strewn like a collapsed parrot.

Latha is standing in the kitchen doorway, her fingers to her lips, her eyes wide. She staggers, goes to the phone, and Nalini chokes an explanation, through sobs, “—never should have come—bringing marriage wishes to the family—I have cursed—should not have traveled so soon after a death—”

Nalini holds her arms away from her—they are quaking like a marionette’s—and Latha drops the phone to grab the woman’s hands. She presses them closed and says, “It’s not your fault, Nalini-Aththai, not your fault.”

You do not remember us at the funeral services, but we saw you, tallying people’s expressions—flickers of guilt and relief rising and submerging in eyes welled with grief. You felt guilty too, trying to read meaning behind those body-whispers, trying to see which direction Latha or Munna weren’t looking, the strange dialog that seemed to be occurring between Nalini and Latha, who barely knew each other but were washing and dressing Mahalaxmi’s body in firm, coordinated gestures, in preparation for the funeral procession. You caught yourself thinking unhealthy thoughts every time you saw Shanta’s head, leaning towards someone else at the services, whispering questions and nodding.

The next year is a bad one for you, we know. You must tolerate increasingly pressing demands from Shanta, silent assent from Balan, and finally even Deepak's why-not shrugs, about when you might want to have children. It is harder and harder to deflect their questions, Shanta's persistent reminders of, "Look, I am even older than Mahalaxmi was, I would like to see my grandchildren before I die."

You try to distract yourself. Munna has moved back into the house and daily, amid your chores, you listen to the sounds filtering from upstairs, wondering what kind of life the Gopalan's are leading now. This is the one thing you share in common with Shanta. You both have learned to recognize the footsteps on the stairs—Munna's every-three-step stride, the clatter of Latha's little feet, the clomp-slap of Ramu's chappals hitting his heels, Gopalan's shuffle—in these moments you forget about the current argument you are having with Shanta and your heads tilt slightly upward, filling blanks between sounds.

You actually blush when Latha comes to visit. It has been several months that you have been imagining her life, and to see her standing before you now sends a surge of shame through your body. Latha smiles nervously at you and asks if, "Shanta-maami is home?"

"Come in, come in, ma," Shanta croaks from her place on the sofa. You stride into the kitchen before she has a chance to direct you to bring tea and biscuits, and turn the fan on to drown out the sound of her voice, "—where else am I going to go, mmhm?"

When you return into the living room Latha is sitting in the chair next to Shanta, who is asking about Munna's job ambitions. Shanta directs her attention to you and says, "Won't you massage my feet for me, ma, they're in so much pain."

You glance at Latha while you scoop Shanta's sparrow feet into your lap. The girl is staring at her hands, is running the thumb of one over the nails of the other, then switching hands to repeat the gesture.

You knead Shanta's soles and clench your teeth when Latha stammers, "So sweet, you two are. It must be so nice, to have a woman in the house to talk to."

Shanta nods. "Yes, it must be hard for you, naa, looking after three men in one house?" She reaches out to Latha, says, "This is my only advice to you young married women—have some children, quick. Wish for a daughter, for yourself, and for a son, for your family."

Latha breaks Shanta's gaze, looks at you in a kind of puzzled panic, gingerly cups Shanta's hand in her own. "Let's see, Maami, let's see," she says, stroking Shanta's arm lightly.

You protest, say that there are plenty of other things a girl of Latha's age could do before becoming a mother, but as you begin to ask Latha whether she finished college, what she studied, Shanta suddenly jerks into a sitting position. She pulls her legs off your lap and they bang against the table, sloshing tea out of the cups. Shanta clutches her arm and says, "Aiyō, I'm not feeling very well—"

At first you think she is playing for sympathy, exaggerating her ailments to make some point about mortality and the importance of children. You scoff that she is fine, absolutely fine, try to get her to lie back so you can finish your massage, when Latha finally says, "I really think something is wrong."

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At the hospital you sit in the waiting room, your mind contracting and expanding as you think about Deepak and Balan, caught in traffic, their hearts booming as they wonder whether they'll make it in time. The doctor is shaking his head, muttering to you, "This is very grave, very

grave.” The fans spin wildly overhead, but you cannot feel their breeze. You hear the plink of flies hitting the window panes, the rustle of nurses crossing the waiting room to doors beyond. Somewhere there, your mother-in-law, Shrimathi S. Gopalan, is fighting her heart for dominance, but she will lose.

Latha and Munna are waiting with you. You are grateful that Munna was home—Latha rushed upstairs to ask him to drive you all to the hospital, and as he carried Shanta out of the house you could not help but think that he looked so much like some predatory insect, limbs encircled round its prey. Munna and Latha sit across from you now in plastic waiting room chairs. He has her hands clutched in his. She is trembling slightly, but she stares at you, unblinking. She looks so small and young that you feel compelled to reach out, squeeze your hand through the nest Munna has made of his fingers, to grab Latha’s little hands within. Her fingers feel like stone.

You think about what might happen if Shanta dies, what it will take to coax Deepak and Balan through their grief, the weight of that household entirely on your shoulders now. You might suggest, gently, a change of place. Bangalore, perhaps, something to ease Appa’s grief—after all, the Bombay house wears Amma’s presence like a ghost and it will cling, cling to you all. A change of place will be good. This is what you wanted, naa?

There is no payment, ma, no payment necessary at all. Who will you even pay, mmhm? What will you say? Are you going to thank Latha? That poor girl has been through enough. But don’t worry. Keep your eyes open, your ears open, hold out your hands to the others. You already have Latha’s cold, brittle thoughts to add to your collection, and one day you can pass that feeling on. We are looking to expand our reach, after all, and Bangalore’s as good a place as any. And, shhhhh, ok, don’t talk about this moment. It’s alright—you’re one of us now.

NINE FILLED WITH AIR: A PALINDROME

Ten old men gather in their usual spot in the grove, under the bent eucalyptus. One unscrews the top of a large flask, the mixing of the drink this week his charge. One has brought the tiny crystal cups, scored on the outside to look like tulip petals. Another pours from the flask. They hold the cups to their lips like precious things, waiting till everyone is served. One shuts his eyes as if the black scent of coffee and cloves should never leave him, should be the last memory he will lose.

One says—My son insists I take the treatment. He says I have given up too soon.

Another says—Isn't it just like we knew they would?

One says—In fifteen years, my granddaughter will be of marrying age.

The others hush him. They sip from their little cups. Overhead, the eucalyptus drops seed into the wind, and some of the men sneeze. A handkerchief is produced, a large grey one, creased folds indicating to the others that its owner, at least, still has someone to iron for him.

—My father, says one, lost all control of his legs, and they withered into lizard tails, wrapped around each other for warmth. Still, every morning, he asked for his shaving kit, and he would stroke the edge of his blade with a whetstone, his tongue jutting through his teeth and making a lump under his lip, just here—he turns his face so everyone in the circle can see.

One sits down, and the others follow, a ripple of folding limbs.

—Seventeen minutes standing, one says, and polishes the face of his wrist watch on a pantleg. Same as last week, one minute and thirty-two seconds better than the week before.

One makes spirals in the sand with a long fingernail. The ones beside him strain to hear the sound of the grains scraping and tumbling against each other.

One says—Gentlemen, I propose we dispense with counting seconds.

Another nods—I have reached a point in my life where I count only the cups of tea. The cups of coffee. The number of times I have to piss during the day divided by the number of times I have to piss during the night.

—I propose we dispense with counting at all, says the one who no longer wishes to count seconds.

At this, the others protest.

If we cannot divide the time, we will not know where it begins or ends—one says.

One swings his head back and tilts coffee grounds into his mouth. His cup comes round the circle, a tiny stain of granules still clinging to the glass. Once, the men had read each other's fortunes out of these dregs. Good wives, round wives, chaste wives. Daughters with eyes full of stars, they read. Sons with shoulders so wide they'd have to step sideways to enter doors.

—How many cups must we drink before we feel it?

The men hum under their breaths.

—Obviously we'll never know, one finally says.

While one refills everyone's cups, they all pull little silver snuff boxes out of their pockets. One with white powder, nine filled with air. They toss the boxes into the center of the circle. One crawls forward, shuffles the boxes and tosses them at random round the circle again. They wonder, again, what the coffee maker will do when he finally gets the right box.

—Obviously you'll never know, says the one with the coffee flask, who now passes it to the man standing to his left.

—But, every cup I drink, says one, I feel it. I prepare for it.

The others nod. They raise their cups to the air, to the weeping leaf-blades of the eucalyptus, toss back their heads. The dregs gather, disregarded, stains too dark for secrets or promises.

—I have lost count, one says, of how many months it has been since I wore a suit.

—I have lost five friends this month. Do you know what I thought each time?

None speak. Each night they shut their eyes with the same one thought, and each morning, this morning, they wake up to remember it.

—The problem of silence, one says, is it fills with sounds. Of leaves and sand storms. Of lungs whistling. It keeps me awake when I'd rather not.

One stands up and reaches out a hand. The men pull themselves up, caterpillar-like, bend and unbend their limbs.

One says—I sometimes wonder if we are fooling ourselves. This ritual with these snuff boxes. I sometimes wonder, he says, voice rising, if we are being duped. Did someone empty the tenth box into the drain? Is that what has happened?

The others hush him. A handkerchief emerges. The men shift their eyes upward, to the deformed tree that spread-eagles over their heads instead of stretching pole-like, like the others in the grove. One sniffs, but the others listen to the patter of eucalyptus seed instead.

—In fifteen years, one finally says, my children will feel what I feel.

—We said they would. We said they would, one of them says.

—Tell your son it's not worth taking the treatment. A hundred years long enough.

One gathers the crystal cups from the men, shakes the dregs out onto the sand. One slings the large flask over his shoulder, the mixing of the drink next week his charge. The seconds they

wait are precious things, as each straightens his clothes, takes his leave, loses his way home. One tries to keep in the smell of eucalyptus wood, but his lungs refill with plain air.

WHAT SHE WANTED

The girls were twins. The boys were brothers, two years apart. The four were going steady, Kavi found out from a boy her own age who also lived in the building. Ehsan was on the seventh floor, corridor A. She was on the third floor, corridor C. The twins and the brothers, Ehsan told Kavi, even though she'd never asked, lived on the topmost floor, B and D. They could look across at each other from their bedrooms while they were changing their clothes, he said.

Kavi said she didn't care about that. She watched the older kids swim instead. They were full-boned and muscular, slick as otters, and they did tricks in the deep end, knotting their legs and arms around each other, tandem somersaults and flips. Everyone for eleven floors up could see, and Kavi wondered why the four were not shy about that.

That summer Kavi got a new swimsuit for her eleventh birthday, a duckback green swimsuit with a tiny frill around the waist, a mini tutu. She practiced curtsies in the mirror, ballet curtsies, not princess curtsies, and though her mother had bought her a swimcap and goggles to match the suit, she left them in mezzanine shower room before slinking toward the pool.

The four were already there. They took turns leaping into each other's arms. Every fifteen minutes one would lunge out of the pool in a spray of drops that dried within seconds of hitting the tiles. He or she would light a cigarette, blow smoke slowly out the nose. The other three formed a triangle in the water, whispered to each other while they waited. A football bobbed between them. Sometimes they would play catch with their legs upturned.

Kavi practiced laps at the shallow end. She wanted to swim like a squid, as if she were made of water. She swam low, fingers or toes occasionally grazing the blue floor of the pool. At the wall, she stopped and rose slowly, so the water would slide off the dome of her head, stream

off her face and down her shoulders. She waited five seconds before raising a hand to wipe her face. Wiping meant she hadn't done it right yet, hadn't become one with the water.

Once, the football flew from the deep end of the pool to Kavi's end. She lowered her body till only her eyes skimmed the surface. One of the twins swore. The other raised an arm like a propeller blade and shot across the pool in three strokes. As she threw the football back to her twin, Kavi saw that water ran down the older girl like oil, like there was no seam between her hair and skin, between her skin and suit. Kavi's fingers brushed the frill of her tutu, the enormous, unnecessary protrusion. At the other end of the pool, one of the boys bit one of the girls on her shoulder, and Kavi looked up to see if anyone was watching.

By evening time, when Kavi was alone and the underwater lights finally went on, she sat on the steps of the kiddie pool and sang mermaid songs. She pulled taut her puckered fingertips and let go, wondered if sea creatures ever wrinkled.

—What are you doing? —Ehsan finally asked her one day, even though she had tried to ignore him. The boy annoyed her a lot. Whenever he jumped into the pool he made a mess. A splash like a melon hitting a wall. Water everywhere. Water in her eyes.

He spat water through his teeth in a thin jet and front-kicked to the deep end and back, right through the twins and their boys. When he returned he spat water again and then crossed his arms at Kavi. —You spend all day in the pool but you never swim —he finally said.

Kavi sank below the surface, tortoise-paddled across the floor of the pool to the other side. When she emerged, he was already there, clinging to the lip of the pool with one arm, his legs slowly pedaling the water. He grazed her knee with a toe. —I've watched you —he said, and pointed up.

—It's rude to watch —she said.

—I can teach you if you don't know how.

Kavi turned her head to the four at the deep end. They were doing their best trick. The girls would flip over, legs upturned. The boys grabbed a leg in each hand. The girls grabbed the boys' legs underwater. They'd then push forward so each couple's bodies turned into a wheel. They barreled in the deep end, his back, her back, his back, her back, churning water as they spun. Kavi held her breath every time they did it. Her lungs always ran out before they stopped.

—I know how to swim —she finally said to Ehsan.

Ehsan pushed away from the pool's edge, flipped backward and somersaulted twice underwater. His eyes streamed when he surfaced, eyelashes clumped like weeds. He shook water out of his ears.

—But do you want to do tricks? —he said, nodding at the four, who had gotten out of the pool and were now distributing cigarettes.

She thought for a moment, and then nodded. When he smiled she noticed he was missing a tooth, far in the back. She tried to ask him what had happened but he was already rushing her through the instructions, dragging her toward the deep— I will stand on my hands underwater, you grab them, and push —and so her feet no longer touched the blue tiles, and his head disappeared, his hands were around her ankles, and she felt herself kicking. She grabbed his upturned legs, wiry black hairs poking into her palms, gasped and puffed her cheeks as she threw her weight onto his body, as he pushed her legs up from beneath.

They might have managed one and a half turns. She couldn't tell. She couldn't tell if he let go of her legs first, or she, but they disentangled without any sense of up or down, all was blue and bubbles and flailing limbs. Their arms knocked together, and then their lips, and underwater Kavi yelped, water filling her mouth, her voice a bubble that shattered into smaller

bubbles. And she kicked away, away from his watery smile, from the water's surface, from what she wanted, her cheeks burning.

IT WOULD TAKE ONLY FIVE

In the third appendix of his *Relaciones geográficas de Indias*, Don Marcos Jiménez de la Espada inventories the remaining tribes and languages of the northern Marañón river area. The following is his complete record of vocabularies for the region:

From *Sacata*: *unga* (water), *umague* (maize), and *chichache* (fire).

From *Bagua*: *tuna* (water), *lancho* (maize), and *nacxé* (come here).

From *Patagón*: *tuná* (water), *aná*s (maize), *viue* (firewood), and *coará* (sloth).

From *Tabancale*: *yema* (water), *moa* (maize), *oyme* (firewood), *lalaque* (fire), and *tie* (house).

From *Copallén*: *quiet* (water), *chumac* (maize), *olaman* (firewood), and *ismare* (house).

From *Chirino*: *yungo* (water), *yugato* (maize), *xumás* (firewood), and *paxquiro* (grass).

Water

Mr. Miguel Da Costa finds the head curator of the Refuge for Marañón Lexicology collapsed in the Jívaroan Room on the second floor. He drops the bottleful of words he is carrying. It shatters, and the words fly free. They flutter in Da Costa's wake as he rushes to Don Elías Lucena's side to turn him over, his knees popping from the exertion.

Lucena's face is blue, his eyelids and lips open but a sliver. Da Costa scrabbles at his face—he has never seen someone die before—and tries to blow through the older man's pale, tightening lips. His breath whistles over Lucena's mouth, and he hears a pitter of sound from the words shelved in the bottles and jars around them. He prods the chest of his old friend, pats his cheeks, chokes his name, «Elías, Elías», but there is no one to hear him. The words Da Costa had released gather at his feet, skitter over his pant-legs and then onto the chest of the dying man. They flicker over Lucena's lips like purple, searching moths.

The pitter becomes a roar as around the two men the Jívaroan words fling themselves repeatedly against the glass walls of their homes. They seek Lucena's slipping mind as it convulses over final memories, now little but syllables.

With his last inhale, Lucena swallows the few words swarmed at his mouth. They hiccup inside, glow in search of his formless thoughts. Lucena's tongue falls like a slug to the back of his throat and the words snuff out. The words on the walls also subside, but Da Costa is too stricken to notice.

Maize

Today, Da Costa decides he will paint over the sign above the Refuge.

—Inés, if you would be so kind, he says to his new assistant, nodding at her to follow him. She puts down the heavy ledger in her hands, where she is crossing off typewritten words against the bell jar specimens in the hallway. The showcase words, Elías, Da Costa scoffs, the ones that no longer form sentences. Since Lucena's death, many of these words lie like debris in the bottoms of their jars. When she picks them out with tweezers Da Costa can hardly watch.

She is a stout young woman, university-bred, sent by the Academy with secret designs on Lucena's work, Da Costa is convinced of this. On Da Costa's desk is a letter from the Academy, urging Don Elías to allow Dr. Inés Lobato to catalog his collection in writing, as if that will revive it.

—Too late, he had said to her, —for Don Elías Lucena's consent.

—Mr. Da Costa, she'd said, leaning over, —that is exactly my point.

And so he let her stay. She came from the city by bus every morning and poked through the rooms of Refuge. She asked him to explain why the words were not pinned to keep them in

order, why the jars and bottles were not labeled. Why there were such detailed records of where and when and from whom the words were collected, but yet no translations. Nothing to explain how they were spoken.

—Dr. Lobato, child, he'd said, —these are questions Don Elías might have answered, but I have no breath left to explain.

She would not be deterred by his detachment, though all he did these days was shuffle around the Refuge picking up bottles he remembered, whispering to them so they glowed like children's firefly lamps. It was his only source of pleasure. When he stopped speaking the words faded, and he wondered if the light left in his eyes was a trick.

Now, he directs Lobato to a ladder in a closet. She hefts it from arm to arm as they continue through the maze of the converted house. He hobbles ahead, holding two paint buckets, white and black. He asks her about her commute, but she does not respond. When he turns she is eyeing the atrium walls, lined with tall glass columns filled with words from Spanish. They drift up and down like mayflies. A few of them have merged into streaks, the glowing trails of the words he just spoke.

She shakes her head and will not answer until they are outside, in the sun.

—Set up here, he indicates, pointing under the word «Refugio».

From the atrium comes a murmuring, responding to his voice. Lobato pulls the front doors shut.

—You have taken my advice? She looks pleased, unusually pleasant.

—I finally admit to myself I cannot carry on like Elías did. Neither can you, he adds, looking down at Inés from the ladder. She crosses her arms, steps sideways as white paint

dribbles off his brush. —You speak fewer languages than even I. What hope do we have of keeping the Refuge running when over half the bottles are now tombs?

He feels a sting behind his eyes and steadies his hand as it goes slowly over the letter «G». Elías, I am sorry, he thinks, I wish I knew what else to do.

He asks Lobato to pass him another brush, loaded with black paint. It's not that he hadn't tried to understand her motives. They were equally suspicious of each other. When she first saw inside the atrium she shook her head as if to clear her eyes. —What shadow-magic is this, she hissed at the glass columns, and then flinched at the streaks of color from within.

«Sombra», Da Costa had repeated, and the word shone bright in the room. —These are not shadows, he said to her, and the words flew together, stretched toward his voice like an uncoiling fern behind the glass.

Lobato cursed, and held a hand to her mouth at the spark she ignited in response.

Da Costa descends the ladder. The word «Museo» shines wet in the sunlight, but its corners are already drying matte.

Lobato huffs. —You are giving up, she says. —You have collected so much inside here, why not come and explain it all. Let me write it down so others can read it.

—This is not an academy for the study of dead languages, Da Costa says. —I do not know what this place is anymore but it is not that.

She throws up her hands. —I said, a school!

—And I said it would never work, Da Costa replies. Lobato's face is flushed and he feels a twinge. His shoulders sag. —Inés, do you not think Elías already tried that?

Lucena tried to teach him, once. He uncorked a bottle and shook its contents into Da Costa's hand, a single word, cold as a tooth. Da Costa turned it over and over, but there were no clues etched into its pale surface, no way to know what sound it contained.

«Moa», Lucena had said, and the word became a sudden ember. «Moa», he said again and the word flared up, hovered between their faces.

The men took turns to whisper the word's name to keep it afloat, and Lucena blew on it gently so it drifted ahead. —We must follow, he said, turning slightly to see if Da Costa was keeping up. —You let the words find themselves, Miguel, you cannot force them to reveal their secrets. This word I keep alive is all alone, all that I have found of the people who used it. But perhaps its family is here. They call out to each other, come alive in each other's presence. The sound of this word a clue, a cousin echo.

They walked for hours, between the shelves, whispering the word for corn, left behind, listening for a response. At day's close, Lucena bottled the word again, placed the cold glass in Da Costa's trembling hands.

—There are so many words like corn, Miguel, lost from their families. Words for necessary things, the last words to die.

Firewood

Seven weeks after Lucena's death, Lobato hands Da Costa another letter, opened. He sighs, and words skitter across his desk. She places a bell jar over them before they can escape.

—I said you could handle all the bills, he says to her.

—This is from Huánuco. Doña Asunta has a fever, they are saying.

Da Costa draws his hands across his temples. Under the bell jar, the words of his favorite language have huddled together like lint. He has begun to speak Cholón daily, a fervent practice borne out of a panic that since it was the first Marañón language he'd learned, it would be the first he'd forget. He recounts fables and songs and the words coalesce into tendrils, gather into a knot. After Lobato leaves each evening he cradles the mass of words to his chest and walks the quiet hallways, whispering prayers to keep the language alive. The knot puts out feelers, and Da Costa follows where they point. He lets the feelers brush against the walls of other bottles and jars, and sometimes hears a cry from within.

Lobato waves a hand in front of Da Costa's face. —Don Elías would have gone to her. I have seen the records. He always did.

—I am not Elías, Da Costa replies.

—You are not yourself either, she snaps. —Look, I have already packed everything Lucena had transcribed from Doña Asunta.

—It is not transcription, child. He waves his hands at her.

—And I am coming with you, she says, —and I have also packed your clothes.

Da Costa looks around his office. There are bottles everywhere from his late night wanderings, and coats and sweaters lying beside them. He has been bringing the clothes down from his suite of rooms on the third floor. In his office he forgets he was cold, abandons them. Lobato has taken to bundling them back upstairs at the end of each week.

Lobato is still staring at him, absently stroking the dome of the bell jar. The words heap themselves, following her fingertips. Slowly, Da Costa pushes back his chair.

Fire

They take a bus, and then a boat, and then another bus. They walk the last miles to the village through a powder rain that beads their skin and clothes. Doña Asunta is kept in a house built on a lobe of riverbank, bricks and tightly woven thatch. The doorway looks onto slow-moving, clay-toned water, with forest edging the other bank.

Da Costa slows and steadies himself on Lobato's shoulder.

—Are you afraid of something, she asks him.

He shakes his head and nods at the briefcase she carries. —Do you know how many trees there are inside?

—You mean an inventory? Doña Asunta has names for species? Are there sketches somewhere, recordings?

Da Costa shakes his head. We never learned. She lived alone for a long time, last of her family. She stayed in this village after breaking a wrist that took too long to heal. When Elías first visited her, she hadn't spoken Mochíca for many years. The words she gave him might have been for her favorite trees, the landmarks on her trails. Her own names, you understand?

—Don Elías could have asked her to clarify, surely?

—It's delicate, Inés, prompting someone to speak in a language they've been forced to forget. Sometimes, the words unearth pain.

He considers her blank face. —Imagine you had a name for every rib in your chest. The twelfth left one as important and unique as the third right. And you grow up, you go to school, you go to church, you move to the city, you move again. How many times do you expect to be asked to name your ribs? What happens on your deathbed when someone finally does?

At the yard outside Doña Asunta's house he holds up his hand and faces Lobato again. —The pain of finding a gash in your chest is compounded, Inés, when you cannot remember how

long it has been there. We will speak to Doña Asunta through her translator, but she will tell us what she wants, or nothing at all. We are the collectors of embers, not keepers of fires. Do not ask her too much.

A bush by the doorway is in bloom, balls of yellow flowers. A colony of leafcutter ants clambers over it, biting half-moons out of the leaves, gnawing at the bases of blossoms, of stems thicker than their heads. Ants below pick up the shower of plant pieces and march through the doorway into the house.

Doña Asunta lies on her back, her hands folded over her stomach. She breathes like she is trying to expel heat from her body, and the woman sitting by her side dabs her forehead with a piece of damp cloth. Her hair sticks to the small pillow as she rolls her head to follow Da Costa and Lobato. The leafcutters ribbon around her bed, past her feet and through a hole in the back of the house. Inés squats by the hole and opens her briefcase. Bottles clink.

—Are you better, Da Costa asks, and Doña Asunta’s nurse translates.

—We have brought memories, he continues.

Doña Asunta sighs, shuts her eyes. Her throat is ropery as she swallows, trying to speak.

The nurse holds a bottle of water to her mouth. —Let her rest, she says.

Lobato pores over a manual. A dictionary, Elías! Da Costa shakes his head. He shuffles to Lobato’s side. —That dictionary was compiled from words the last ten speakers remembered. Do you think it runs the gamut from A to Z? It’s pitted with holes.

He takes it away from her. She picks up a bottle and says, —I believe this one contains greetings.

—On what grounds?

—Because that is how Mr. Lucena arranged his collection, she says with a tight smile. She holds her lips to the glass and whispers «Asunta» and a light flickers within. —He put their names inside, if he was collecting from people.

Doña Asunta coughs and smacks her lips. The nurse whispers she will return, winces as she stands.

Da Costa leans back and considers Lobato. —What else have you learned, he asks her.

—In the atrium, when I said Doña Asunta's name, the word was a different shape, a different color. I fished it out, put it in a bottle and read to it from a dictionary for hours. It came alive again when I read out, «fuga».

—You see the trouble, then, with thinking a sound can be written down and defined? He sighs. —I will tell you a truth, Inés, I loved Elías for his persistence but I long gave up hope. That's why I stopped accompanying him on his collecting trips. He thought there was honor in keeping the words safe. But when I asked for whom, he could not give me a response.

He moves back to Doña Asunta's side, rewets the cloth left by the nurse and strokes her forehead with it.

—There's a strange slipperiness to death, he says. —Sometimes a mind returns to youth though the body has failed it. Fifty-sixty years of inhibition, of speaking Quechua instead of Mochíca, Spanish instead of Quechua, it's all thrown off. Elías seemed strangely enervated by it. Towards the end, I began to question —he rubs his eyes and shrugs at Lobato, unable to finish his sentence, the nagging doubt.

They can barely make out each other's faces now, as the sun dips behind trees outside the house. Doña Asunta's nurse returns, smelling of ash and onions. She says they may eat at the

house next door, that beds have been made for them. But as they stretch their legs, a glow bursts around Doña Asunta's face and she calls out.

—Is she having a nightmare, Lobato says, stumbling back to her briefcase.

Da Costa clutches Doña Asunta's hands. Words bubble from her lips. The bottles in the briefcase glow orange and the glass clatters.

Doña Asunta blinks at Da Costa. —You are not the Taker, she says to him in Mochíca. As the words fly from her mouth to the ceiling they highlight the lines running across her face, fine as mushroom gills.

—Please, I do not understand what you mean, Da Costa says.

—Can you not use the bottles, says Lobato. She puts one in his hand.

—I don't know the sounds, Da Costa says. He speaks to the nurse in Quechua. —Please ask her if she would like to tell us anything.

Doña Asunta pats Da Costa's knee. —You picked a bad time to come, to ask me about the past.

In Da Costa's hand, the bottle feels like it is full of bees. He tries to follow the trails they make inside the glass. Doña Asunta's fingers graze against his hand. —The Taker asked me to sing songs for him. He was very kind, but also very silly I think. Is there a song in there, do you know?

Da Costa's swallows a lump like a stone, blinks away tears. He unscrews the bottle and the words stream out. He reaches back and Lobato puts another in his hands, and another, and he empties Lucena's entire collection of Mochíca into the room. The walls light up as the words rise and fall, as they swarm around Doña Asunta. She coughs and smiles. Inhales deeply. Words rush in and out.

—Elías would say words are histories, Da Costa whispers to her, —we must treasure each one, even the orphans.

Doña Asunta nods as if she understands. She props herself higher, and the nurse puts out an arm in support.

—Especially the orphans, Da Costa says. He remembers the word for corn, the lonely rattle so many years ago, as he reverently placed the bottle back in its shelf. —I think Elías was wrong.

—I would like to be carried out like that, Doña Asunta whispers to him, pointing at the leafcutters. They would make me feel lighter than I am. Perhaps it would take only five ants to carry me out.

The buzzing words above them join together, a net of grass. They drift toward the ants, and then stream back as Doña Asunta sags into the pillow again. Da Costa lets the nurse take his place by her side.

—Leave them, he says to Lobato, who is trying to pick a strand of words from the air. Da Costa remembers the Cholón words he left under the bell jar. They would have withered in his absence, as they did each night when he went to sleep. He feels an urge to run from Doña Asunta's house.

Instead he beckons Lobato to sit beside him, and they watch her breath. As she slips out of consciousness, the tangle of words that hover over her break apart, litter down. They crimp at the edges, lighten. Da Costa waits till they are ash flakes before he stands up. Outside, in the milk of sunrise the bush by Doña Asunta's house is bare. He wonders when the ants finished their work.

House

Da Costa asks Lobato to take the rest of the week off. She steps into her husband's waiting car, her face drained. In the back, her children sleep propped against each other.

—Will you be alright, he asks her.

—They say it gets easier, the more times you witness it.

Da Costa shakes his head.

Inside the Museum, he lingers at Lucena's door. He has not opened it in months, and is suddenly afraid he will encounter Elías's ghost, ready to accuse. He startles at the cold touch of metal, not realizing he is already turning the doorknob. The room is shadowed, and when he turns on the light he deflates. It looks smaller than it used to, drab. He had drawn the curtains above the desk before he shut the door, and now regrets leaving everything in the dark. He pulls them open. Clouds pile the sky.

Lucena's shelves are clustered with orphaned words, bleached as empty shells. If he wanted to, Da Costa could recall their names, as Lucena would have done. Parlor tricks, Elías, he thinks.

In Da Costa's office, the Chólon words look like a mat of hair. Da Costa lifts up the bell jar. Says hello. He bends over and tells the words about Doña Asunta. About an old woman, with wrinkles fine as mushroom gills, who he met for the first time as she lay dying. How he knew she'd said something important to him but he'd never know what it was.

The words light up. Da Costa gathers the mass in his hands, the streams of words dripping and twining themselves round his fingers. He sings in Cholón, every song he can remember. With one hand grasping the pulsing language he reaches with the other for the bottles

he'd been collecting, all the ones that Cholón took an interest in, strewn about his office. He unscrews their tops, tips the other fragments of languages into Cholón.

By the time he has emptied everything in his office, the mass is engorged, takes on a squidlike form.

—Let's go for a walk, Da Costa says to it.

Cholón slithers out of Da Costa's hands, considers the shape of his body. It coalesces into a matching shape, humanoid but childlike. It reaches out a hand to Da Costa. It is eyeless, its skin a map of words that shift and pulse with light.

—What would you like to see next? Da Costa asks it.

—What would you like to see next? the creature mimics. It shrinks and darkens for a moment, and then tries again. —Show me the others, it says in a burst of light.

Da Costa takes it through the Museum, each floor, starting with Lucena's office. The Cholón creature puts its fingers right through the glass bottles, pulls out the flakes and shards inside. Some it sticks into its mouth, a hole in the center of its face. Some it spits out.

Da Costa takes it to the atrium last, after it has explored all three floors of the Museum. By now, it a patchwork creature, with words of different colors that speak to each other, forming knots inside its body. It is taller than Da Costa. It must bend low to step through doors.

—What is cross-country skiing, the creature asks Da Costa, immersing its hand into a pillar of Spanish, absorbing the words, expanding. —What is computation?

Da Costa stumbles over the definitions. With each explanation, he feels more hollow, slightly more at a loss for words. The creature is no longer Cholón. It is something from the Marañón valley and it inflates, turning multicolored as it consumes every word of Spanish since

Lucena and Da Costa last refreshed the atrium, pouring in newly-coined words. It asks, —What is a virus? What is a quark, but by now Da Costa is having trouble joining the ends of sentences.

By the time the creature has plunged its fingers into the last glass column in the atrium, he cannot recall his name. When all the containers are empty, Da Costa is partially surrounded by the bulk of the creature made of words. Its limbs are like paddles now, nonfunctional. It absorbs them into its body, and its body turns into a mist.

—We are leaving now, the creature says, and Da Costa nods, speechless.

Author's note: The epigraph is sourced from two texts, the 1965 edition of 19th century explorer Marcos Jiménez de la Espada's *Relaciones geográficas de Indias - Perú*, Appendix III (143-146), and contemporary linguist Willem F.H Adelaar's *The Languages of the Andes* (2004, written with Pieter C. Muysken), which contextualizes the difficulties of documenting and studying extinct or poorly preserved languages in the Inca region with “neither grammars, nor dictionaries [nor] even the sort of religious texts that Spanish priests considered necessary for evangelization” (391-407).

THE GLASS WORLD-BUILDER

It is difficult for me to talk about Sarla Shah. These days everyone has a label for her. Some labels I find too distressing to repeat. Others are ludicrous. Some are true, but in my field truth is at best a construct defined by context; at worst it is meaningless. For instance, if you stop referring to a person, if you never bring up her name or her deeds in places where she was a tectonic presence, does she then fail to exist?

Sarla, who unstuck herself from others' labels, invented one for herself. "I am a microbial geosculpturist," she would say to the men she met at pubs. I would snort into my beer; she would sip from her fluorescent cocktail of the evening, her eyebrows raised at the sodden, half-drunk boy who had ambled over to chat her up. She had that quality, when she was younger, before the fame and inevitable infamy, of drawing men and women to her who knew nothing about her at all. It was perhaps her hair, cut short and fluffed up like a cockatoo, or perhaps the arc of her jaw, the line of it echoed by her clavicles, and again by her wrists, her gazelle-legs.

But there is no elegant way to chat up a woman at a pub who has just told you she is a microbial geosculpturist, so the boy would raise his beer glass at her, say "Whooo!" and disappear into the thump of music.

And that was Sarla's intent. She was a genius, and couldn't pretend to have normal conversations with anybody. She did other things. She fiddled in her laboratory long after school hours and work hours, and I grew used to her returning home as late as four in the morning, muttering to herself in the kitchen as she rifled papers and boiled milk before bed.

She talked her way into the MFA program at the School of Art at Rutherford, while simultaneously enrolled at their College of Science and Engineering, on the strength of several dozen microscope slides of preserved sea urchin larvae. They looked like tiny, crystalline crowns

suspended in a blue-black landscape studded with other random occlusions—grime from a fingerprint, dust motes, a tortuous strand of fiber invisible to the naked eye. “The Isolation Series,” she called it, holding up the slides to the light. Her “canvases” then were just that—band-aid sized rectangles of glass, a drop of solution swirling with minute organisms, a wafer-thin square of glass pasted over the droplet. Then she’d microscope through the skin of liquid caught between the two glass layers, freeze frame, pose the eye of her camera to the eye of the microscope—shutter-snap. Exhibit. Applause.

I will be the first to admit I didn’t always understand Sarla’s art. This is not just because I was a linguistic anthropology student. I have an eye for aesthetics; when I was an undergraduate I took a cross-listed art class on resource deprivation, survival, and the human imagination. For my final project I went on a self-imposed fast for two weeks and then speed-skipped the cafeteria line in my dormitory. Some people dropped loose change on my food tray while I drew, and one girl even gave me a hamburger.

When I moved into graduate housing two years later and put in an application for a roommate, Sarla came knocking. She strolled through the apartment, rubbing her chin, looked at the cafeteria sketches tacked to the living room wall. I rushed to explain that I had just put those up as placeholders. Sarla gave me a half smile and said, “I, too, have something of an eye. I think we’ll get along just fine.”

Sarla settled in and I soon realized that while I thought myself ambitious, inquisitive, and driven, my abilities paled in comparison with Sarla’s. She studied microbiology. She taught it. She read papers about genetics, virology, cell culturation. In what she referred to as her “spare time,” she photographed the results of her lab experimentation, working early into the morning.

In what she referred to as “cocktail time,” she’d take me with her to her favorite pubs and we’d exchange sketches on napkins of the senselessly dressed people we saw there.

In the mornings over breakfast she’d say things like, “selective breeding is gods-play, but it’s not as bad as people make it out to be.”

I’d blearily nod into my cornflakes, begin to say that actually eugenics really was a bad thing, but she’d be striding out the door already, her body unbent by the weight of her laptop, her camera, the many books she was reading, her pace unindicative of four hours of sleep.

I understood Sarla’s science much less than her art, but I can tell you that her real breakthrough, the thing that first pushed her creative envelope, was with the nematodes.

She’d shown me her worms before. One night after seven beers and four cocktails between us we clomped through the snow, arms wound round each other for support, from downtown through campus back to our place, and as we passed by the Cell and Molecular Biology Building she tugged me toward the glass doors saying, “I have a burning need to know whether the nematodes dance double when I see drunkly.”

We meandered our way up the stairs to the laboratory where she worked. Once inside she disappeared into a side room and reemerged with a small glass disc in her hand.

“You anthropologists have it tough. If you could put people on petri dishes,” she waved the disc at me, “you wouldn’t have to do all that gliding about in low-flying planes business, video cameras poking out of your asses, scaring uncontacted tribes with your technobabblerly.”

I complained that I had never once even considered the idea of attaching a video camera to my ass and flying about over forests looking for tribes.

“Yes, yes, you just study suburbia, I know it.” She positioned the petri dish under a binocular microscope and squinted through the eyepieces. “Yes, yes, that makes sense,” she said into the dish.

She pulled me to her by the nape of my neck and nodded at the microscope. “They are what the ocean would be if it had order,” she whispered. The pads of her fingertips pressed cool and firm into my skin.

I had to readjust the eyepieces—my eyes were set wider than hers. If it was an ocean she was seeing, then it was frozen amber. The sodium bulb of the microscope was the only light source apart from the moon, and it filtered through a layer of hard jelly in the dish, through ghostly curlicues traced over the jelly’s surface. Animal tracks. The nematodes were comma-sized, transparent, undulating like sine waves in random motion across the dish.

“We study their genetic makeup. Sometimes we knock out bits of their DNA. Other times we add something new. It changes the look of them. The way they move. The way they reproduce. I’m interested in their musculature myself.”

I was at a loss to comment sensibly on this. Without the beers I might have been able to ask her to explain things more. Instead I mumbled something about Homer’s wine-dark seas. How ancient people only made names for colors if they were useful to their survival.

“So in Ancient Greece, I would have seen this jelly sea in true color, perhaps. And true motion.” Sarla covered the petri dish and switched off the microscope light. “At least I know that tipples most definitely make the wavy lines wave more. Perhaps if I decreased the shutter speed on my camera I could suggest motion on a frozen landscape? But then there’s the blazing light of the—” she disappeared, still talking to herself, into the side room to put away her worms.

Sometimes we talked about my work too. I study tribes. Not exotic ones, but tribes formed in schools. I once watched an alpha-clique of teenage girls make a boy disappear, just with words. He was a freshman, fresh off the boat from Bangladesh, and because of a misunderstanding of the school's social system he asked the wrong girl the wrong question about where the restrooms were. Teenage girls are linguistic pioneers and powerhouses—the alpha-clique turned him into a non-presence not just by ignoring him, but by inventing words to ignore him with. I told Sarla about this, about my fly-on-the-wall research techniques, watching CCTV footage from the school corridors, collecting data from public, online message boards frequented by the girls, setting up interviews that tangentially got the girls talking about their favorite school activities. They reduced the boy to a figurative piece of lint, haplessly buffeted by the movements of others, eventually eddied into a forgotten corner of the classroom that was never swept up.

Sarla's eyes gleamed. "This is why I like you, you know?" I'm sure I blushed. "You take this miserable specimen of humanity and put him in a glass jar and turn him into a work of art, something to talk about."

I tried to deflect her response, focus on the girls' casual cruelty, but she dismissed me, "Oh, love, don't tell me five years of anthropology hasn't clued you in onto the essential nature of anthropodes."

Sometime before the end of the school year, the Bangladeshi kid killed himself. Sarla shrugged. "The trouble with human subjects," she said, "is that there are so many variables to account for. 'Todes are easier that way.'" She patted my cheek, "It's ok, love, the girls will find a new creature to torment next year. You'll write your dissertation on social strata and linguistic isolation yet."

I took a much needed summer break. I could not take my mind off the boy, about the role I played in documenting—perhaps facilitating—his death. I could not admit my guilt or sadness to Sarla, could not stand to have her remind me of the importance of remaining an objective researcher, “lest you muss up your data with your tears,” she might have said.

Sarla emailed me two weeks into my vacation. The entirety of her message—she did not like to write—was “I am calling the series, ‘Rush Hour Rickets.’ There is much to explore.” Attached were several photographs taken through the microscope. A familiar yet unfamiliar landscape. She must have used color filters over the light bulb, or perhaps replaced the light source entirely. Against grey-brown, gleaming jelly were nematode tracks. But instead of the old loops and waves, the lines were kinked, like endless, writhing chopped-off forks of snake tongues. The nematodes, frozen in this new style of locomotion, shone like little angle brackets.

I wrote back asking whether she would train the worms to jump hoops next.

“No,” she responded, “cross intersections.”

When I returned to Rutherford, it was to a different Sarla. She whirled in and out of the apartment at all hours of the day, without pattern, and I finally realized it was because she had struck big at both her lab and at the art studio. She was preparing an installation piece for the University Museum. She was coauthoring a paper on—and I take liberties as I paraphrase this—a genetic quirk that caused exaggerated muscular twitches in nematodes. Her coauthor and labmate, Darius, a man with bushy muttonchops and a crease between his eyebrows from thinking too much, said breathlessly to me at a dinner meeting at the apartment that their experimental breakthrough, “broadly speaking, would be most influential in the medical field. I mean for muscle regeneration, of course.”

I accompanied Sarla to the art studio where she played with various set-ups of high resolution video cameras and flatscreen projections of the microscope worlds. She had converted a wide, shallow baking tray from our kitchen into a larger version of a petri dish. Nematodes zigged invisibly over the jelly, coming into view as she moved her microscope across the tray. Strangely, their paths were confined to a grid system now, and when I asked Sarla about this she said, “It’s a chemical toxin. The negative space of the canvas is only tangible through other senses. For the ’todes, it’s chemosensitivity. For us, it’s emergent—until the ’todes go exploring, we don’t see the walls that trap them. You recognize the landscape, don’t you?”

I shook my head.

“Utter balls,” Sarla muttered. “That’s the limitation of having a viewing panel the width of a pea. I really am going to have to use three trays, and triple the microscopes too.” She turned away from me and scribbled onto the back of a library receipt.

That fall, campus literati flocked to view “Navigation Patterns of Urbanites” and cooed at the three microscopes moving in sync on a pre-programmed flatbed over three flanked trays of Sarla’s weird worms. They gasped in dawning recognition of the familiar landscape on the flatscreens—the nematodes’ erratic movement across the jelly had been confined to a map. Over the three weeks that the trays were displayed and refreshed and displayed again, they traced pathways that mirrored the walkways of our campus. It was like Sarla had learned to paint with mist—lines shimmered and faded out of sight as the nematodes crisscrossed the terrain.

On opening night of her exhibition I came expecting the crowd to be flashing flutes of champagne, but I guess it was not that kind of gig, in those early days. The crowd sipped coffee out of waxed paper cups. I eavesdropped.

They talked of “a mirror world of our frenzied existence,” of “transience and seasonality.” “It’s a new architecture, don’t you see?” “It’s so *je ne sais quoi*. So *glissant*.” A child held up to the trays to see the microworld up close said, “Ewwww,” and her father nodded to his companion, “To embrace our primal instincts is to call a worm a worm, no matter the shape of the spotlight.”

In the back, Sarla stood with her hands in her pockets, her chin held up at that alluring angle that invited looks but not conversation. She was wearing a long-sleeved white tunic over her jeans that I think was deliberately chosen—a labcoat for someone who never wore labcoats when she worked.

Her labmate Darius hovered by her side, his eyes fawning. He tried to hold on to Sarla’s elbow but invariably, in movements gentle and firm as the robot-arms moving her flatbeds and microscopes, she would dislodge his grasp.

The morning after the last day of her exhibition, as I helped Sarla uninstall her work, I asked her about him. Whether there was more to the “mate” than labmate.

“What a curious play on words,” she replied. “I certainly don’t intend to have children with him, if that’s what you mean.”

I frowned and remarked that he seemed very fond of her.

Sarla smiled and picked up one of the nematode trays I held out to her. “They’re difficult like that, aren’t they?” She began to vigorously scoop the jelly out of the tray with a plastic spoon. It fell in wet crumbles into a plastic bucket marked with a biohazard symbol. “You spend your whole life birthing something, culturing it, rewarding it for doing something right, punishing it for transgressing, and then that’s all it lives for—approval and rebuke. As if nothing is worth doing unless someone is watching, with peanut shells or applause.”

I had no idea what this had to do with Darius, and I told her so.

“It has as much to do with Darius as has to do with humanity, love.” She must have seen my confusion. “Weren’t you listening to the talk at the show? Some people will say and do anything if it’ll get them a fuck.”

By the time Sarla had written her dissertation, her personal experiments had moved on to bacterial cultures and the fractal properties of crystallization. She was like a cat that way I suppose, single-minded until the next enticement came along. I asked her why she’d dropped her focus on muscle regeneration work. Whether the challenge was daunting. Polymaths were not immune to overworking themselves, after all.

But she scoffed at the suggestion. “My energy is boundless. It’s patience I have a problem with. Anyway, bacteria are far more interesting to me right now.”

I tried to point out that finding a cure for muscular dystrophy seemed like an interesting pursuit as well.

She shook her head, as if I were naïve. “Did you know this planet would be inhospitable were it not for those pioneer species, the ones that spat out oxygen as a mere waste product of their metabolic exertions? We are far too anthropocentric—seeing the world for what we want to see in it. But the bacteria, those are the real world-builders.”

I tried to apply her outlook to my research—pursuing students eagle-eyed and disimpassioned, allowing linguistic trends, personality cults, and other social phenomena to emerge organically, instead of going out in search of them. I tried to tell myself anything was interesting as the next, everything was culturally relevant. I tried to tell myself that I didn’t get to pick what was worthy and what was not. Occasionally I would catch Sarla smiling at me, poring

over notes at my desk after midnight. She'd say, "Are you sure you love the research, not the research subjects?"

She was offered a research position out of NYU. It was all she could do not to toe-hop around the apartment with the phone held to her ear—she had told me while applying for the position that they had "an incredible department of mad, wild geeks, the sort of people who would hook up temperature sensors to plant leaves and use the output data to pluck the strings of a harp."

Darius and I sat at the dining table watching her pace round the loveseat, the phone cord expanding and contracting as she moved. Darius had shaved his muttonchops, and rested his bare cheeks in the cups of his hands, pouting at her. When she said, "Well of course, how could I not accept?" I watched him as he massaged his face and flexed his lips, practicing how to smile. I wondered what he felt when he kissed her, if her skin was cool all over, if his body worked overtime to warm up.

"You will visit," Sarla told me, at the airport the day she left. "You have an eye, I think, for the sorts of things I like to make."

I nodded, mutely, unsure of what I would do.

It is perhaps prideful to say that I am an authority on Sarla Shah. But I kept a file drive full of everything they ever wrote about her and everything she wrote herself. The "official" biographies. The introspectives and editorials on her work. The magazine interviews. Her academic publications. The police reports. It is harder, now, to collect this data. I read everything, and it seems so—misrepresentative.

We corresponded periodically. I saved those emails too.

Her work looked increasingly topographical every time she sent pictures. “Oat Fields” was an impressionistic landscape of blues and hays interspersed with daubs the color of poppies. Those were in her bacterial culture days.

She once wrote, “I swear, I stay up at night only to see patterns of replication,” and sent me twenty snapshots of rivers emptying into an abyss of deep blue. They were magnifications of flower and leaf petals, a viral infection having triggered the jagged lines of contrasting pigmentation.

She experimented for a while with different salt solutions, allowing them to dry gradually under the microscope, forming crystal pyramids and the fractal coastlines of an invented Pangaea. “Abiotic environments are not really responsive enough,” she said, when I asked her whether she could build mountains that way.

When she traveled to conferences or exhibits of her work overseas she would send me “electronic postcards” taken out of airplane windows. “A sodium-blooded giant,” she wrote of Shanghai, the intricate cityscape hung like a web in darkness, night dew flaring in sudden torchlight. Over Amsterdam she said, “Why on earth do we paint the ground like Mondrian when we could all be Van Goghs?” Over the Rockies she yelled, “Firebreaks like razor cuts! But the crumbling!” This made little sense to me until I looked it up—as in her photo, the mountaintop landscape looked like a giant lawnmower had been taken to it, erasing lines of trees to keep wildfires from spreading.

The irregularity of her emails had an effect on my work. I felt dehydrated by her absence, enervated whenever she wrote. On bad days, when I played back tapes of student interactions on playgrounds or transcribed interviews at youth shelters, I marked my subjects as “predator,” “parasite,” or “prey.” When I confessed this to a coworker, she narrowed her eyes and asked, “So

what am I,” and I couldn’t meet her eyes. I wondered what it would mean if Sarla one day felt she didn’t need me to be her audience.

On good days, I wrote proposals for new projects. I knew that Sarla couldn’t operate without my commentary on her work—it was the only reason she still wrote to me, after all these years.

I began to follow her advertised movements as best as I could—I knew that if she were scheduled to give a talk or attend an exhibit somewhere I could expect a postcard. If she had achieved a breakthrough in a particular experimental process or visual technique, she would send me the results. I became a minor expert on various anthropogenic and geological landscape features—I learned to read her microscapes as transcriptions of her thoughts.

On my twenty-eighth birthday Sarla wrote me a quixotic greeting, “Do you know I lie to you least of all? That makes you special. I kid. In seriousness, on this wonderful day, appreciate the beauty of truth. My life’s work is in displaying truths... as I see them. And I do wish you a lovely day, old friend.” The picture attached was of her mutant nematodes, against a wine-dark sea.

Five years after her move to New York I found, from a gossip blog, that Sarla had married. A microbiologist, it seemed, one who studied the pathology of airborne disease organisms. He was shorter than she was, with reddish, receding hair and a jowliness to the chin.

I debated for a month whether to email Sarla with congratulations, or whether to broach the subject of her secrecy more directly. But she emailed first. “I hope you don’t mind, love, but I’ve married someone. Jones is an excellent dinner companion; he always has something interesting to say about microbes. And he never laughs, thank goodness. I could not bear to live

in mirth; it distracts me from my work. At any rate, we marry for convenience, I always say, so there was obviously no point in throwing a party to celebrate such a mundanity.”

I thought about poor Darius, the conversation I’d had with him the week after Sarla had left. He’d asked me to meet him, at a pancake diner, and immediately after the waiter had taken our orders he demanded, “Why did *you* have to be the last person to see Sarla before she left town?”

He leaned forward and ran his eyes over my body, as if expecting an explanation to be imprinted into my skin, something that would betray itself through raised hairs, gooseflesh, a rush of blood to the cheeks.

I think it was the first time I saw him clearly, released from the fog that was Sarla’s presence. It was only in this light that I understood how she worked on us, and I began to laugh. Darius turned red and then purple, so I grabbed his hand. He flinched, but I held tight and asked him if Sarla had told him anything about foraminiferans.

“Those hard-shelled amoebae?” he blustered, “What does that have to do with anything?”

It had to do with everything. Minute, deep sea organisms that secreted complex, calcareous shells studded with pores—they fed and moved by putting out tiny tendrils through the pores. It was in a book Sarla had left behind with a note on it for me, “Please return to the library. Cheers, love.” I read it cover to cover first, thought of my dissertation research, studying adolescents who gathered word-shelters around them, so sensitive to the forces of insult and praise that they built shields to try and deflect it all.

Sarla’s marriage, or at least her explanation of it, was a release and a curse. Suddenly, I could explore relationships more fully, but at the same time, I saw myself through her eyes—a resource collector. I insisted to my then-partner that we would have our wedding in a court

house. Absolutely no fanfare. Only the legal allotment of witnesses present. I thought of telling Sarla the news, but then considered what that might have meant—was I seeking her approval? Her consent?

Sarla's opus, "Cellulose/Hellulose" was held this month last year. Contrary to my expectations, her marriage to Jones was still going, four years strong. I suppose his conversations enriched her. I envied him—the subjects I studied were so predictable, so homogenous, compared to the incalculable diversity of bacterial species he worked on. I'm sure it must have been inspiring to listen to him practice his conference presentation on "Fabricant dynamics: Infectious viability of modified gram-negative bacterial propagules" at the dinner table.

Sarla had switched, during this time, from canvas glassware to constructions of wood. She built intricate, laminate structures, the bands of different colored wood alternately left with straight, raw edges, or sanded into gentle, striated valleys. She was writing, at the time, about the properties of fungal wood colonizers, how some of them secreted chemicals at the frontline of their advancing bodies that were dead zones—no man's lands that other fungi couldn't cross.

Her landscapes were pustulent with fungal growths, "Francis Bacon brought to Bosch's smoldering hell—a rotting, incomprehensible finery," said an eminent art critic.

There was an order to the madness though. She inoculated specific positions on her laminates with fungi that were differentially capable of colonizing the various types of wood. They grew exactly where she wanted them to grow, but their fruiting bodies—eruptions of tiny mushrooms, powdery blisters, or gelatinous toothpaste strands—were raucous, organic explosions of color.

She emailed me as soon as she knew she would have her one-woman exhibition. “You utterly must visit. Watch my crowd. As a linguistic anthropologist, I would be curious as to your response. But, do me just one favor, love. Arrive late. I’m not really interested in first-comers to this exhibit, more how word-of-mouth affects the opinions of laggards, for whom the material has already been digested and verdicts about the success of the work already established.”

I did not mean to be as late as I was for the opening. My daughter’s babysitter came down with chickenpox the day before I travelled. I postponed my flight to New York a day while I found someone else to look after her. I spent the flight trying to remember how many times the babysitter had been over to the house before she realized she had chickenpox, and the odds of my child having caught it from her without any of us knowing.

My taxi driver let me off in this hypochondriacal state at the street corner where the warehouse converted for Sarla’s exhibition stood. I was as startled at the sight—the building cordoned off with yellow and black tape, then fenced off, then policed. Figures in blue hazmat suits emerging and disappearing through the building’s doorway. The incessant clicking of reporters’ cameras. The ambulances.

I learned what had happened from the news, same as everyone else. Sarla’s last show was an intricate superimposition of glass flutes and inverted, open funnels studded into her laminate landscapes. Overhead, the latest of her microscope-to-video-output rigs was suspended like an interplanetary buggy about to descend. The glass vials wafted invisibly when they were unstoppered.

Thirty people in the immediate vicinity of the gas, including Sarla, died within twenty minutes of the show’s opening.

At first, the news reports constructed tragedy. They said genius bred madness, and madness bred single-mindedness, and single-mindedness birthed absentmindedness, and Sarla must have made a mistake. A neurotoxin concocted accidentally while constructing the magnificent, studio floor-spanning landscape. As more investigative reports were released, the tunes changed. They cried murder. Bioterrorism. Mental illness. Pathological instability. Sarla's husband Jones, twenty-four hours after the first mics were shoved in his face, was found in his study, bullet-seared throat dripping onto the hard drives of his computers, crushed to grit and scattered underfoot.

The cops took my hard drives too, once they found out my connection to Sarla. I kept copies of my files, of course. They could find nothing. The files were leaked and got into the hands of psychiatrists. Art historians. Conspiracy theorists. People have been writing biographies ever since. Some are due out this month.

Do I have a duty to set Sarla's story right? I am unsure. My academic career is founded upon phenomenology and interpretation but I cannot describe the indefinable. It would be like descending upon a tribe that had no name for itself, with a mirror and a dictionary and a mimed dance that described the word "human."

I suppose in admitting this I've already failed her. What could I even say? What I know of Sarla is private, iridescent, occluded. She collected names and accolades and curse words the way elephants collect oxpeckers, flies, and ticks. She was indifferent to such things. I'm left with these magnificent scraps of her presence now, not quite sure how to put them together. Whether I should bury them away.

She once grabbed me by the face while I was working, brought her own face so close I could almost feel the hairs on our noses whisk against each other. She hissed, “Keep your distance from your subject, love, or you’ll lose focus.” I think she was right.

AT END

Before End was a penal colony, it was an artists' commune, but before it was a commune it was advertised as the most exclusive mansion in the known universe. The architects had good reason to bill it as such—it was the only facility at that time embedded into the edge of the universe, and the screwbolt-shaped station promised “a view from the top like none before.”

Even the scientists didn't have such nail-grazing access to the roof of the world, nor would they ever be able to afford it, and they grumbled as they watched the jump ship carry the eleventh Seif and his entourage to End. They logged into their data feeds to see what the Seif would report of the touted views, hoping, by observation, that they could learn something new.

At first, the Seif sent pictures from all the windows in the bolt-head, a dome that looked out at the spangled depths of sky beneath. He'd pose members of his entourage against the backdrop, and have them point at various places of interest. “You are here,” he'd say in his caption, and the entourage would point at the feather of galaxy from which he knew the scientists were watching. “Our home is here,” he'd say of the black cloud that hid the distant boiling constellations that drifted between pockets of emptiness, beyond which a shriveling galaxy held the remains of our original world.

The Seif might have been pleased to know his exhibits were not for nothing. By careful calibration, the scientists determined the absolute heights of all his entourage. The Seif himself, of course, was the tallest among them, his body-casing built to command presence in every room. The scientists cross-referenced these measurements against those of the speckled star clusters, and realized that the roof of the known universe undulated, but that it was also closing in.

The Seif grew bored, as such men do. He turned to the unexplored lower levels of End, the bolt-shaft regions, which the architects had built to hold a city, enough people to service many generations of Seifs. Nuclear skylights powered arbors and fields, from which the Seif's entourage foraged for food between their drunken raves in the bolt-head. The windows on these levels were blacked out, and at the very bottom of the facility, the Seif found a triple-sealed set of airlock doors, with a sign that read, "Do not open. The oculus back here does not work."

The Seif demanded that his entourage unblock the bolt-shaft windows. "I will not accept veils," he said. He ordered the best of his entourage, a woman famed for her tricks with electronics, to tackle the doors leading to the oculus.

For weeks, he sent pictures of his entourage scraping the paint covering the lower-level windows, with crude tools they'd fashioned from pieces of broken furniture. "Where are the blueprints," he asked the scientists, hoping they would convey the message to the architects, who had ceased contact with the outside world after selling End to the Seif. "Where are the manuals," he said in frustration, leaning against the oculus doors while the best of his entourage pulled wires out of the walls.

For days, no one noticed, but they had already scraped through. The scientists were the first to try and warn them. From their photos, they could see amid the scrapes of steel and carbon a colorless color for which they had no name—the edge of the universe, never documented by naked eyes. It anchored the shaft of End in a mist, and the scientists wondered, "Is it indigo? Is it beige?"

When the entourage at last realized what they were looking at, it put them off food and drink. "It has no dimension," the Seif said. In his photographs, his people clumped before the lower-level windows, studying their fingernails and kneecaps, things they still understood. The

scientists could not measure what they saw through the windows any better than the occupants of End. Their eyes slid off the colorless color, the bottomless bottom of the universe. “Come away,” they whispered to their data feeds, to themselves, “We know now that it will engulf us.”

The Seif’s electrician organized the mutiny, when she realized what he wanted to do next. “He kept yelling, ‘It’s the frontier, you cowards,’ so we left him to plunge through it himself.”

“Last I saw,” she said, stepping out of the jump ship, “he was ramming against the doors of the airlock with a wrought-iron bench.”

The Seif sent us a photo of his face. The caption read, “I am going to open the oculus.” The next photo he sent was white noise, though possibly indigo, possibly beige.

Later, the artists commandeered a jump ship of their own. They resealed the airlock, restarted the nuclear generators, ate tinned meats while the arbors and fields re-grew. They painted many pictures, wrote many fables about our martyr, the eleventh Seif. Before End was converted to a penal colony, to begin mining beyond the edge, the artists wisely painted over the windows of the lower levels again. They spoke of what they’d seen only in terms of fingernails and kneecaps, only in terms we understood.

AUDITIONS FOR THE VOLUNTEER MISSION TO MARS

On our first round of duty, when a dust storm lifts the entire desert into the air, I believe Aamir when he says we could be explorers on Mars. Lokesh rolls his eyes a bit but we clutch the walkway guardrails nonetheless, all three of us side by side, and we sway like we're bobbing shipside on Mare Erythraeum, squinting through the fog of sand for a coastline, for the sweep of a bronze mountain.

But then the air clears and we're back inside Marhaba, its smartglass exoskeleton shuddering in the dying wind. In the space between the exoskeleton and the fixed inner walls of the biosphere our feet gong upon the walkway. The sandlot outside the facility turns into camelback dunes, grizzled with scrub and broken plastic bottles. The sky is scalded milk. The road that brought us to our two-year contract jobs disappears northwest, in the direction of the Arabian Gulf, where skyscrapers bite into the horizon. Burj Khalifa, twice as tall as the rest and seemingly Dubai's spiritual north, glints like a glass needle in the afternoon sun.

I had read about the Burj on the inflight magazine from Colombo. I wonder how many tourists are crowded into that observation deck, braving vertigo and designer perfumes to pore over Dubai through the dust haze at the top of the fifth-tallest manmade structure in the world. At this very moment, some preening tour guide might be waving a lotion-lacquered hand toward a telescope pointing back out at the desert: "For a mere forty dirhams more, ladies and gentlemen, catch a glimpse of Dubai's enterprising Vision for the Future."

Lokesh waves in the direction of the city. "I'm practicing for the Mars men," he says, "who surely are not quite so strange as the strange people that visit this Emirate."

“You’re a visitor too,” Aamir reminds him, pulling a camera out of his backpack. He leans over the walkway and props a shoulder against a gently swaying smartglass panel, focusing on a distant flick of cloud far out over the shimmering desert.

He is right. All of us are visitors, beholden to Dubai’s commercial needs whether we work two years or ten or a lifetime. No income taxes. Who wouldn’t move here? Aamir has a residential visa because his parents asked that question thirty years ago in Karachi after their firstborn and couldn’t find an answer. Lokesh and I have work visas for the duration of our contracts but we suspect we’d find other jobs soon enough.

“But,” I point out to the boys, “we haven’t come here to make money, nor to spend it. We came here for Mars.”

On this point we agree. We brought our engineering and computer science degrees to the biosphere because when we look through the smartglass we see in pink and orange. Our friends think we’re lucky. There were only fifty openings for on-site Phase II work in Marhaba. But none of us qualified for Phase III work, and that was the real reason we applied in the first place. Still, we discover that first day as we tour the walkways inspecting the smartglass climate controllers, from the south side of the facility particularly, we can almost pretend otherwise. We trace Mars upon the undeveloped desert, working in a daze.

An off-road buggy erupts over a dune in the distance, bearing a couple of teenaged boys. From the look of their outflung arms, they are whooping as the little open-framed vehicle races down the sun-side of the dune. A piece of foil buffets skyward in the buggy’s slipstream.

“Is that,” Aamir squints at the kids, “a McDonalds burger in the driver’s hand?”

Lokesh snorts. “Bugger me if those punks are the future we’re going to Mars for.”

I take my father on a tour of Marhaba some weeks after I settle in. He nods at me through my phonecam as I explain that the jerkiness will slow down once the car parks at the biosphere again. Aamir's little Toyota gives another sputter. I swing the cam around to introduce everyone. Aamir raises his eyebrows in acknowledgment but keeps his eyes on the road. From the back, Lokesh wags a half-eaten candy bar at my father, saying, "We went grocery shopping."

Aamir shakes his head. "A box of Mars bars is not groceries."

"Ah, but what a pun, is it not?" my father says.

I show him the other supplies on the back seat: loops of wire, a box of screws, turmeric root, cardamom pods for tea, printer paper. Jameel's Golden Store is one of those small cement-block affairs erected on service roads leading into the desert by entrepreneurs who figure laborers can't be choosers but that unexpected choices sell better than just the basics. Lokesh learned about the store from Babu, one of the last of the Phase I workers, who'd tended to the farms before the Phase II agronomists took over. On this trip to the store, Lokesh threatened to buy Aamir a fluorescent orange teddy bear to make him smile more. But as far as I can tell, Aamir is not actually unhappy, just pensive.

We drive past the labor camp where the Phase I's lived while they built Marhaba. It looks like a discarded shoebox made of concrete, and is about a fifteen minute drive from the facility. It will be torn down eventually, and was built far from Marhaba so as not to appear in any promotional footage. During his last days Babu chose to live inside the biosphere instead of the labor camp, sleeping open-air, as it were, in one of the crop fields, even though Lokesh had offered him a bed in the dorm room he shared with Aamir. During our last days, we'll be asked to live in the labor camp too, to make way for the Phase III cosmonauts.

I pull down my window and stick the cam out, to give my father a better view of our temporary home. The claim is that the exoskeleton was designed to echo the form of undulating dunes, but this is only when the facility is posing, when the smartglass is deactivated, the panels transparent and flat. Most of the time Marhaba looks like a bleached and irritated crab. A big central cavity holds the farming units and the living and research facilities extend from this area like many legs. The smartglass changes color and shape, helps maintain uniform environmental conditions within. Most of the time, the panels are pinched tight around the internal complexes to shunt wind, deflect sun.

“The spikes poking up,” I explain to my father, “are where we’ve contorted the panels into funnels to disperse hot air up and away from the farms. We also mottle the panes so that they reflect light during the day and absorb radiation at night, should the temperature ever drop that low.”

“The temperature never drops that low,” Lokesh says to my father, leaning between the front seats.

“But on Mars it’ll be different,” Aamir says, “and we’re testing the facility for extreme weather conditions after all.”

We pull into the parking lot and I hop out ahead of the boys to take my father into Marhaba through the front entrance, the triple-door passageway that will be airlocked once the cosmonauts settle in. Aamir and Lokesh lope through one of the outer maintenance doors and climb up the ramps to the walkway system that arcs overhead, hanging from the exoskeleton. They will take the shortcut to their dorm room, walking over the algal towers and sewage units and then through an internal maintenance door into an electrical room in the men’s res-complex.

Aamir discovered this route, and showed me one leading to the women's res-complex on the other side of the facility.

“Ah,” my father exclaims, as I hold the cam up so he can see how far the farming units stretch, several cricket fields long and wide, rows of fruit trees and grasses and vegetables. “How grand. And all the way out in the desert.”

I am not so sure. Anthroposystem technologies have been a craze for the past couple decades, but the problems we face maintaining the biosphere make me skeptical of their ultimate efficiency. I blame my father's generation for our Mars-gazing, and my grandfather's for our Earth-blindness. Marhaba would not have gotten half its funding if one of Dubai's young sheikhas had not argued so forcefully for a green solution to the heat crisis. She said, “We must take inspiration from our forefathers.” The logo of the company she founded is an abstraction of an old wind tower, squat and square, burlap cross-walls funneling breeze into a sand-walled, palm-thatched fort. She wants wind tower and smartpanel solutions for the whole Emirate, for every last person in Dubai. The plan to host cosmonauts who would receive their Mars training in Dubai is an added boast.

“But think of it, Abbu,” I once said to my father, soon after Babu's contract termination. “For every ten Emiratis here there're ten undernourished Asians imported to erect those wind towers. About seventy more Asians fly over, like me or Lokesh, and set up shop under the wind towers selling everything from real estate to limbus because it's good money. But of course, there aren't enough wind towers now for a hundred people, and since neither we nor the Emiratis would know a crossbeam from a crowbar, we call those ten Babus back to build more wind towers for us—”

“You're missing another ten percent,” my father interrupted.

I counted and then shook my head. “Oh, those are the goras, that’s all. They’re just here to recreate. Some fantasist takes pictures of them to slap onto the real estate ads so everyone will think this is the new Europe or America. Sometimes they’re dressed up to look like happy Emirati families first. What a joke.”

“But, chellam,” my father then reminded me, “you chose to work in this new America. How can it be a joke?”

We didn’t speak of the issue again because I didn’t know quite what to say.

Halfway through my walk across the farming complex I stop and point my cam at the soil underfoot. It is black and moist, smells of rain. I tell my father, “Babu said this was shipped from Sri Lanka. ‘Your mathra-bhoomi, no?’ he said to me. ‘It goes down six feet.’”

“Can you imagine, chellam, one day, maybe your grandchildren will call Mars itself the motherland. When I was your age, I could only dream this.”

I nod reluctantly at my father. I’m not sure I can dream that big.

I end my tour of the facility in the mess hall. The Phase II workers have been taste-testing meals from crops grown in the farming units. Lokesh and some of the other daring ones have even tried currying meat harvested from the grub vats, but I don’t think the fad will last. My father says goodbye as I sit down next to Aamir.

“You look like him,” he says to me.

“I sometimes wish I felt like he does,” I reply.

Above us, on a rotating cycle between corporate advertisements and promotional material for Marhaba, the smartglass displays stats on the facility. It is as if there are clocks hung in the sky—local time in Dubai, Mumbai, Karachi, Dhaka. When the Phase II technicians moved in to replace the Phase I’s, Aamir added Manila to the feed.

Oxygen production is down seven percent. Water levels stable since last week. No organism, I think, as the numbers flash and change, ought to be this conscious of its own existence. Solar panels at fifty percent efficiency. “If we let in anymore light,” I have explained to the agronomists, “and we’d scorch, not just the plants.” We have yet to find a balance between letting light in and keeping heat out. Indoor temperature thirty-two. The joker who pre-programmed the feeds included outdoor temperature. Fifty dropping to forty-eight just when the sun sets. After midnight it can drop to the twenties. I watch those numbers from the ceiling window in my dorm room, but always fall asleep before the desert cools.

*

By a year’s time, we treat Marhaba like it really is our home. It happens in little ways. I rescue a pregnant cat from the dumpster behind Jameel’s Golden Store and, far from protesting, my colleagues cheer her wanderings around the facility. “Where will Mangala go next?” we all ask, because the plants are arranged in rows and the insects contained in double-doored rooms, and each of us circulates the facility on our assigned jobs like we are in orbits. The cat pops up when and where she wants. Her kittens we name Phobos and Deimos.

Lokesh adds to his routine a secret project with Cecilia, one of the chemists who monitor the algal vats, and we find out later that they have constructed a distillery in one of the service tunnels running under the water purification complex. The hooch is green-tinged and tastes of bad tea, but I enjoy the tingle it leaves on my lips. “It’s the start of something promising,” I encourage Lokesh.

We also decide, after the umpteenth trip to downtown Dubai after Jameel’s Golden Store proves wanting, that the difference between camaraderie and madness lies in the immediate, reliable availability of small things, like fennel seeds or chocolate. “I bet even the Phase III’s

would appreciate some spices to go with their beetle-grub,” Lokesh says. Aamir drives Lokesh and me away from the nauseating flash of the giant malls and into the tiny back-alleys of old Dubai, to the Iranian dry goods merchants, the Pakistani gardening stores. We return with little bags of seed and saplings, plants that we consider essential to cooking that the biosphere architects never considered cultivating. Lokesh buries foil-wrapped candies in the soil along with the plants and Aamir laughs out loud. The agronomists complain but, in the mess-hall months later, we find vegetables cooked with methi, ajwain, fried locusts dusted with hing.

*

On the anniversary of the first unmanned Mars landing, Aamir hacks the smartglass controls to change the internal displays. It is nighttime when this happens and I am in the millet field with a couple of the soil scientists looking at temperature readouts and plant growth rates. We are bathed in the glow of an advertisement overhead—freeze frames of the birth of Marhaba. The German architects who designed the facility shake hands with Dubai’s crown prince. The CEO of a Japanese construction firm, wearing a suit and a blue hard hat, stands in front of a half-finished res-complex corridor holding a spanner. Tow-headed children point at a starry sky in awe, a backlit, dune-shaped Marhaba gleaming behind them. Four models dressed as an Emirati family sit to dinner, toothy smiles, the view out the window behind them a red dunescape. We are suddenly plunged in darkness, and then a grayscale photograph unfolds above us, replacing one fantasy with another.

For a moment I feel as though earth and sky have inverted, as if I am hanging off a false ceiling from which I will drop to the craterous rock-field below. The grey slowly blushes and I realize I am looking up at a false-color satellite image of the surface of Mars. When I was a

child, I could name each of those turns in the rock—my father taught me to spell by them. Now, I forget the labels, and it's as if I'm remembering a map full of holes.

I excuse myself from the soil scientists and head south to the office I share with Lokesh and Aamir. As the smartglass crossfades to a picture of sunrise on Mars I quicken my pace—I want to hug Aamir for his gift to us. Yes, I think, this is the Mars we signed up for. I climb up to the walkways and run with my hands upraised so the fingertips brush the smartglass. The friction turns them pink, and I pretend it is red dust.

I burst into our office to find Lokesh slapping Aamir on his back, saying, “Well done, man, well done.”

“Chal, guys, it's nothing,” Aamir says, smiling slightly. We follow his gaze around our office, because we know it is not.

Most of Marhaba's work and sleep spaces are steel and white plastic. The columns of green and yellow algal tanks are an occasional thematic variation. But here it is different. Aamir has been taking photographs of the sky from within the biosphere since his first day here, avoiding the city skyline and focusing on the minor stretch of desert in the south. The combination of dust haze, humidity, and light pollution are eerily dislocating. Contrary to popular belief, Martian skies are not the color of blood, nor even the anemic pink of a typical Earth sunrise. They are brass, like a Dubai sandstorm, lilac like the neon glow of the city at night, bleeding across the horizon and obscuring the stars.

Aamir prints and tapes his sky shots to the walls of our workspace. There are so many now that it is as if he has retiled the walls into a mosaic shrine to his dreams. We call it the Mars Room. It is my favorite place.

Aamir suddenly asks, “How much time, do you suppose, before Marhaba is converted into a hotel?”

Lokesh puffs his cheeks. “Five years?”

“Sooner,” I say, and Aamir nods in agreement. “Have you heard, they’re proposing to have a celebrity join the Phase III crew? To document what happens inside.”

“In addition to the eight cosmonauts?” Aamir asks.

“Replacing one of them.”

“Makes total sense, nah?” Lokesh says. “You can’t sustain public interest in a science lab that no one can enter or leave for two years without having someone pretty stuck inside to contrast with the wrinkly cosmonauts. Bet you it’s a girl.”

“Vapid or snarky?” I say.

Aamir gets up and paces the room, then shoves his shoulder into the door and leaves.

Lokesh clicks his tongue. “No sense of proportion, that boy. Dreams so hard he forgets probably no one’s going to Mars at all. Why should we, when we could send the robots up for cheaper?” He sighs. “I’m going to follow him before he disappears into the tunnel system again to brood. Coming?”

I shake my head. “He’s not a dreamer,” I say to Lokesh as he walks past. “He’s just offended that we still live in a world where a rich man may buy his seat onboard a history-making ship.”

The door swings shut and I stare at Aamir’s pictures. Whoever expected the future to be any different?

There are resentful mutterings when the smartglass stats are updated to reflect our assignment release dates. “Two months till Phase III,” floats overhead as I emerge from my dorm room to join the others for breakfast in the mess hall.

“Just when I was getting settled in,” Cecilia says to me.

We’ve always known that once the cosmonauts arrived, all fifty of us would be moved into the labor camp out in the desert. We will live there for a month, during the transition from Phase II to III, while the cosmonauts learn how to control the biosphere themselves. Once they seal themselves inside we will move on. The labor camp will be torn down. It is in our contracts. We pushed it to the backs of our minds.

Aamir looks murderous nonetheless. “Boss-man made me do it,” he growls at me, pointing up, where the Marhaba promos are also back on display.

I push my food around my plate.

“Here, have a kitten,” Lokesh says as he joins us, dumping one each in Aamir’s lap and mine. He leaves and returns again with his breakfast. I pet Diemos compulsively. Phobos paws at Aamir’s chest. Aamir looks down at the animal and frowns.

“I mean, what did you expect?” Lokesh finally says, pushing away his empty plate. “Get over yourselves, guys. It’s like that sadness after Babu all over again. Sure, we made Marhaba our home these two years, but Babu *made* our home, man. Have you ever thought about him?”

Lokesh thinks about Babu a lot. Every time we check on the rolling crossbeams that operate the exoskeleton he says, “If I were Babu, and I was building a rocketship, I swear I’d stow away on it. I’d make myself a little cabin in the pipes, somewhere no one would look.”

“You’re right,” Aamir finally says. “We should just make the most of the time left.”

Lokesh grins. “Let’s have a party, then. A month from now, before we move out.”

“You’re serious,” I say.

And he is. By the time we tromp back to the Mars Room Aamir and I have caught Lokesh’s enthusiasm and decide that it should be a theme party. A “Mission to Mars” party, we call it. We wonder aloud what sort of music we’d carry to Mars. It is not something we imagine the cosmonauts would take. I think about the mosques in Dubai, the muezzin’s call of “Allah-hu Akbar” pouring from the minaret speakers like water falling over round rocks.

“Prayer music,” I say. “Tuareg tribals, Sufi singers, aboriginal priests recorded on wax discs. You need faith in something, going so far away for so long.”

“Lullabies,” Aamir says. He pulls open his computer and searches the web for a while. A woman’s voice rolls out of the speakers.

Lokesh shakes his head. “But it’s so sad, man.”

“What do you expect?” Aamir says. “That mothers are happy all the time?”

“I want drums. Lots of them,” Lokesh pauses and cocks his head. “Also, found music, stuff that’s made from non-instruments. Those Mars pioneers, they won’t be allowed to take grand pianos and sitars and stuff so they’ll have to make do. Listen—”

He holds out his hands. One finger moves up and down to an imaginary beat.

Aamir and I are nonplussed, but then we notice that Lokesh is keeping time with a blinking light on the side of Aamir’s computer. Suddenly the room feels full of sound. Clicks and whirrs from our hard drives. The keening of the ventilators. A dull throb underfoot from the sewage processors. When we go out onto the walkways that day we stomp extra loud, in time with each other, creating a metal heartbeat with our feet.

*

The following weeks, as we run final diagnostic tests on Marhaba, we wonder wildly about what it would be like to settle Mars. “Obviously,” Aamir says, “pets should be allowed.” He has taken to feeding Phobos caterpillars from one of the grub vats, and the little animal follows him everywhere.

Lokesh fiddles with the smartglass programs, using his modeling software to pinpoint an acoustic spot in the center of the farming complex that would carry our party music deep into the legs of the biosphere. He experimentally reconfigures the roof at that location, to amplify sounds. When we stand underneath, in the middle of a potato field, our voices arc high and far. “This would be the place,” Lokesh says, “to hold council for the new settler community.” He throws up his head and says, “Countrymen, gather, for we shall dance.”

Our laughter bounces across the fields.

The night of our party, I wonder aloud about how sound would carry in the thin, cold atmosphere of Mars. “Think about gas physics,” I say, crouching in the dirt among the potatoes to doodle sound wave patterns. Aamir and Lokesh bend down next to me and we rub and scratch into the mud. At last we decide that the sound would be deep, brooding, but that it would whisper into silence a few paces from its source.

“Can you imagine attending a cello concert at the foot of Olympus Mons?” Lokesh says.

He pulls out a laptop and fiddles for a moment with his speaker settings. We bend our heads together and listen—under the rattle and hum of the biosphere, the chatter of the other Phase II’s as they gather for our party—to the sonorous music that filters out. It feels like the desert has risen around us, and the music is a tiny fire, keeping the tips of our fingers and noses warm.

The next day, Lokesh and I help Aamir take his photographs down from the Mars Room. We cannot bear to imagine the cosmonauts ripping them off the walls themselves. We pack our belongings, gather the cats, take them all to the tiny vans waiting outside Marhaba to shuttle us to the labor camp. Aamir fiddles with his laptop and says he needs to check some things, that he will follow in his car.

The AC in our van is on full blast, but the fifteen-minute trip to the labor camp turns it into a den of sweat. The camp entrance is marked “No. 7891.” Lokesh looks around at the empty sandlot. “Where’s camp number seven-eight-nine-o?” he asks. I nudge him in the back of his leg with my suitcase. I am not in the mood for jokes.

The rooms in the labor camp are equipped with tall metal bunk beds, six to a room, two metal cabinets, and a clothes drying rack. An AC unit thrusts through the window, cutting out all light. I turn on the fluorescent tubes in the ceiling. The walls have been painted swimming pool blue.

There are enough rooms in the camp for each of us to have one of our own, but I go to find Lokesh as soon I’ve put down my suitcase. “Let’s get out of here,” I say, and we walk downstairs and past our new mess hall into the tiny brick-laid courtyard in the back. A strip of sand, flush with the concrete wall of the courtyard, has been planted with squash and beans. Someone had built a trellis of rope for them. The plants are shriveled. Lokesh walks around the building in search of a hose.

Aamir’s mother drops him off at the camp that evening, and drives off again in his Toyota. “Won’t need it when we’ve got chauffer service,” Aamir mumbles as he joins us in the mess hall.

“This is from the garden out back,” I say, passing him some squash from my plate. I have no appetite, and I cannot decide if it’s because of the size of the crop fields in the biosphere, or the size of the garden at the camp. Lokesh stares at the bright blue plastic tabletop under his plate as if in horror. The biosphere was no less synthetic, but at least the colors there were soothing. We say nothing as we try to eat.

For the next month we are taken back and forth between the camp and Marhaba as if we are on a tarmac conveyor belt. I look to the city in the distance, sharp lines blurred by the haze caused by congestion. I try to muster up some enthusiasm for a new job. I haven’t even begun to look.

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The cosmonauts are broad-shouldered, brusque, preoccupied with Phase III preparations. They listen offhandedly to our explanations of how the irrigation systems, light controls, and harvesters work. They seem to know it all already. Or they think they will figure it out by themselves. We assumed they would all be Americans or Russians, but they aren’t, not quite. There is a Chinese woman on their crew, but she speaks with a British accent. There are two men with Russian names who sound Australian. Another man we assume to be of Arab extraction but someone tells us he is from Chile. We want to ask him how he landed this job. We want to ask them all, but they seem so self-assured that they might just say they were born into it, and we do not want to hear that response.

There is a dust storm the day we hand over our reports on all the data collected from the Phase II tests. Aamir is bright-eyed and fidgets while waiting to hand off his files. Lokesh has taped a key to the top of his stack. I ask him what door it opens and he winks, “It’s for the cosmonauts to figure out.”

The key is brass, heavy, and I think it may not belong to anything at all.

When we are done, we climb the ramps to the walkways because Aamir insists on taking pictures. I am weary. As Aamir fiddles with his camera I look out at the desert, at Dubai's jagged skyline, and kick the guardrail. The sound vibrates through my feet.

"What's the point?" I say. "This stupid desert, no one should be here at all."

"But it's beautiful," Aamir says.

I fume. "It's all just the same. This is the seventh biosphere system. Outside there's camp number 78-hundred, thousand, it's just numbers. All of it. Are we ever surprised anymore? Every few weeks now they release new data from the Mars rovers. Little-green-men-mania. Soon we'll find out there's really no life out there after all. Or perhaps that we've killed it all by plonking our great rockets and all-terrain robots and biospheres right on top. And then what? We'll forget we ever cared about the planet. We'll plant another flag in the red dust and let billionaires have their weddings there. They'll ship mud and technology we make and test here to provide climate-controlled vista points at Olympus Mons and all the tourists will do is complain that they can't see the foot of the volcano when they're on top, and that they can't see the top of the volcano when they're at the foot, without ever realizing that Olympus Mons is so big that it stretches past what the eye can see in any direction."

I shake my head as if to get the nonsense out of my ears. "If it were up to me," I continue, "I'd hold auditions for volunteers to go to Mars. People with talents so specific no one would even have thought they'd be necessary until they were halfway to the planet and realized how much they missed..." I think for a moment.

"Micro-distilled liquor," Aamir says, punching Lokesh on the shoulder.

"My mother's cooking," Lokesh adds. "Oh, and Babu's green thumb."

“You, Aamir,” I say, breathless. “We’ve *got* to send an artist up to Mars. We can’t just rely on cameras. They’d get the dimensions of Olympus Mons all wrong. Who’s going to explain the beauty of something so large with just numbers or words?”

Aamir considers this, running a thumb along the buttons and dials of his camera. “I’m going to miss you two,” he says, and gestures at Lokesh to stand by my side. “Would you do me a favor though?”

Lokesh and I exchange looks. “Sure, man, of course,” Lokesh says.

“Remember not to worry about me, because I’ll be fine.”

I open my mouth, and then shut it. Marhaba’s guts rumble.

Aamir lines us up in his camera, the whole arc of the biosphere swooping behind us. He smiles at us, raises his eyebrows to make us do the same. As he frames his shot he says, “I’m so glad we understand each other.”

The shutter snaps.

*

The day the cosmonauts seal themselves inside Marhaba, there is a double barricade set up outside. Spectators line up along the road, and policemen in green uniforms and maroon berets watch them from behind aviator sunglasses. The swath of space behind the barricade leading up to Marhaba’s entrance bustles with reporters. They march about the entrance like they own the place. Some few, CNN, BBC, are led inside for a quick tour.

There is not much to see from out here in the crowd. There is a gusting wind, carrying sand that stings the eyes. Fathers hoist their little daughters and sons onto their shoulders, mothers with hair and duppattas and abayas flying in their faces try to control their older children from sneaking through the barricade for a closer look. I wonder how many of these children will

decide tonight that they too are going to be cosmonauts, only to find out twenty years later that it doesn't quite work that way at all.

Lokesh holds my hand and whispers that Aamir is not in the crowd. Nor was he at the mess hall that breakfast. Phobos is missing too. We look at each other.

"I believe he'll find his way home," I say, "Give it a couple years."

Someone at the entrance taps a mic on a makeshift podium. Our boss said the line-up of speeches would be brief. Marhaba's president. A professor of astronomy from the university. A song by a pop star. And then the march of the cosmonauts. They would come outside for a few minutes to wave at the crowd and go right back in. Begin the great experiment of pretending to live on Mars. From outside, the president would make a show of sealing the doors, though they open from the inside. He'd push a countdown button embedded in of the smartglass panels that would mark two years in months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, seconds. A long cluster of numbers looks more impressive, I suppose.

"At least Aamir's not here to see this," Lokesh whispers.

I nod. "He would have hated the charade."

I wonder where he is. Tucked under the sewage digesters, perhaps, with his little cat. Or somewhere else in the maintenance tunnels, which he came to know so well. I wonder what he thinks he will achieve. I wonder if it will extend his dreams. Once, when a sandstorm lifted the entire desert into the air, I believed him when he said we could be explorers on Mars. He and Lokesh and I put down our dataloggers, clutched the walkway guardrails, stood side by side. We swayed like we were bobbing shipside on the Red Sea of Mars and squinted through the fog of sand for a coastline, for the sweep of a bronze mountain. Before the winds died, we saw it. Land-ho.

CAMP NO. 5411

Unlikely as Bhuvan is to ever write to his sister Phoolan, right now, were he to write, he would say to her, I am coming home. If he had pen and paper, if he had envelope and stamp, if he could part with a single dirham not coated in sweat, he might address his confession thus:

Behind the black Mercedes

Shopping mall parking lot (that one with the skiing slope I built in the desert)

Address not valid by the time you read this

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

But this is not accurate, and it is the first of many struggles with truth. Bhuvan did not, for instance, build the skiing slope, though he has come to a point where he will lay claim to anything, even as he claims to leave for good. When he finally sees his sister again, he will stretch his arms wide and say, Look at me, Phoolan, am I such a small man now?

He chews away the skin around his fingernails while he waits, because it is not quite six in the morning and the metro is not open yet. At his feet is a leather satchel, all that he owns. The basement parking lot, empty, still drones with sleepless generators. A whisper of traffic off the highway keeps Bhuvan on edge, still the chance someone scrambled into a van to tear after him. He thinks about all he has done. His shirt clings damp to his back and as he lifts and adjusts, he smells tension reeking through the fibers like petrol, like rocks turning to dust. His shirt no longer fits as it did, two years ago, but he has nothing else new to wear—he has already chucked the new blue workman's overalls into the dumpster behind the camp.

He fiddles with the buttons on his phone. Phoolan's number, a memory traced across the keypad like a map. She probably will no longer pick up.

Phoolan, he might begin, Look at all that I have built. I put my entire body into it. Should you not be proud? You used to ask, “What is this work?” You used to ask, “Have you become a big man yet?” You asked so many questions I stopped answering my phone. That is why, Phoolan, not because of Aftab or Baadal, or because I was too drunk or stoned to explain what-all I did.

Aftab is running in the opposite direction now. Bhuvan decides he will not miss the man. Aftab always knew what he was doing. He would dive into the Gulf perhaps, emerge on the coast of Bandar Lengeh still smelling of lemons, speaking Farsi like a native. Bhuvan sees their friendship acted out on a stage, Aftab playing the part of leader, confidant, friend. His face is a mask, a work of art Bhuvan cannot understand.

Baadal’s face shifts in his head like a many-petalled flower, a dahlia exploding in a fully-sealed room. Baadal’s skin, milk-fat, purple fingermarks around her neck and shoulders, her eyes beyond reproach. That he cannot swallow. Phoolan would reproach, Phoolan would slap the skin off his cheeks. But Baadal had no argument left. When Aftab told her his plan, she said, “What is there to agree? My life was long unspooled.”

He has her picture in his phone, but he cannot bear to look at it again. Collateral. He will tell Aftab later, delete your photo, but Aftab will tell him not to sentiment over it. Why does he bother? He will have to tell Phoolan, but she has even less sentiment than Aftab, she will not show him sympathy at all.

Instead, he will tell her all that he built. He shifts his weight and grips the bumper of the car, makes a list. I put this car here, he thinks. This car, this parking lot floor, the iron bars inside the pillars holding the mall up, concrete pillars painted all different colors of the rainbow and marked with letters and numbers to remind people where they are. Above, the plumbing, the AC,

the ceramic tiles in the bathroom, the granite counters, the marble floor of the fountain in the west atrium.

Bhuvan gets comfortable now, shoves his satchel aside and adjusts his crouch so he can brace his back against the wall behind him. He built marble entrances and marble pillars and granite walls and buffed steel archways. He built pleasure-castles to bring back gold to throw at Phoolan's feet. The fountain in the atrium upstairs, the one that dances like swans flapping their wings, he built that too. He also built the escalators, always rising. Everything rises in the city of gold. Bhuvan's memory rushes back to his mother, dragging him to a church in Mumbai to try an education on him. These escalators fold their hands to heaven more earnestly than those church pillars. This is all he noticed in the house of god, people looking up-up-up because there was nowhere else to look.

In this shopping mall too, up above the parking lot, there's the skiing slope rising to heaven. Heaven is made of snow, he wants to tell Phoolan. But he knows better, Aftab showed him. Heaven is a machine that takes the heat out of water and spits the dead flakes to the ground. It sprays over the children's heads as they slip and slide down the slopes of Mount Dubai, monument upon the land. He told Baadal about this once, but she would not believe. He showed her photos from his phone, but she said they were faked.

Above it all, bathrooms, fountains, shops, skiing slope, there are the chandeliers. He will explain to Phoolan, lighting is the most work of all. He huffed on each crystal with his own mouth and rubbed it against his pant leg to give it a nice shine and hung it up himself. If only she could see how they sparkled. Electricity, he put it there. He sucked it out of tar, spun it round and round so fast it split into light and heat and the motors that flapped the wings of the water-swans and twinkled upon the children's heads as they slipped down the refrigerated slopes of heaven

hidden in the mall. Far above is a glass pyramid roof of gold, because this shopping mall is built on gold. Yellow gold, black gold, red gold, doesn't matter to Bhuvan anymore. He painted the glass pyramid with lead and copper and other precious metals and now it too looks like a rainbow when the light shines on it.

Above it, the sky. Mr. Abdilrahman once told him and Phoolan that the sky wears a belt of stars. It is really the only lesson he gave them that Bhuvan remembers. "In some clean places of the world," Mr. Abdilrahman said, "you can see clearly this belt is green-black and purple-black and pink-black. It is pricked through with light that is blue-white and yellow-white and red-white."

Bhuvan wondered, when he first came to Dubai, was first assigned to the high-rises, whether he could confirm what Mr. Abdilrahman said. But the nightshift men were always bathed in halogen light, and he saw only the stain of a yellow sky above, only blank canvas below. He didn't want to tell Phoolan about that.

In Mumbai the best skies hung over the ocean. Bhuvan would sit on the rocks at the marina and watch the sun sink into the west, catching clouds and dust, sea birds and salt-spray. All of it Holi-colored, beautiful, unnatural. He clenches his fists. Today, he will leave Dubai, and when he gets home he will take any means of transport from the airport to the marina. He will buy hot samosas and sticky chutney for dinner, let his clothes stretch to hold all the food inside, let that food reform his body, return his youth. He will sit barefoot on the rock wall, rub his toes into the grit, watch the sun sink in a blaze upon the Gulf.

He peeks from behind the car, uncramps himself, slings his father's satchel back over his shoulder. His father carried this satchel three times into Dubai, returned home thrice with gifts and once with a pox from which he could not recover. Bhuvan claimed the satchel before

Phoolan could, but perhaps she never wanted it anyway. She did not argue with him when he took it.

A light flickers from the glass doors leading into the mall. The workers would have wiped the floors clean. The metro station would be opening. Bhuvan pats down his too-loose clothes, one pocket weighed with a phone, with Baadal's face, her open mouth, her staring eyes. The other holds his passport, the stolen money, he hopes enough.

Phoolan, Bhuvan says in his imaginary letter, let me take you on an exit tour of the city of gold. I hope you will see why I must come home.

Bhuvan feeds cloth-y dirham notes into the metro's vending machine, thinking how many lies he has already told. He didn't put the electricity here himself. Phoolan would have seen through such a story at once. He was never good with such things. Like this vending machine, which doesn't work. He bangs at the keys, but Phoolan would have fashioned a screwdriver from a scrap of junk, torn apart the access panel and fixed the problem herself.

Bhuvan directs his attention to the booth by the vending machine. A vendor is emerging from a featureless door in the wall. Some closet-sized office, more a cabinet than a place of work. The ticket vendor shambles to the glass partition, lifts his chin in a silent, "What."

Bhuvan slips him money, mumbles, "All the way to the airport." He glances at his raggedy fingernails, the skin around them nipped and bleeding, shoves his fists into his pockets, wondering if the vendor noticed. The vendor pokes through the cash register for change, muttering that it's too early to break big notes. Phoolan would have had no patience for him. She would have knuckle-rapped on the glass to hurry the man, yelled at him to straighten his clothes.

Bhuvan grabs his ticket from the vendor and nearly bumps into a woman now standing behind him. Some business lady, suit-dress that makes her look like a fat bird, a pigeon. Phoolan, Bhuvan thinks, you could have been a bigshot lady here too. He walks as fast as he can through the barred gates onto the platform. He will be first in line to get into the metrocar. He glances at the trickle of others entering the station. Early commuters. He slouches, drops his face into his neck, leans into a pillar and tries to stare down the rising sun. The sky pales behind the skyscrapers, and the last lazy streetlights go off.

He wonders where Aftab is, fingers the phone in his pocket. When they abandoned their van, Aftab held him by the shoulder and said, “Now it is time to flirt with your own luck.” His mouth turned to a sickle. “Give your sister my regard.”

He pushed Bhuvan gently away from him, walked backwards out of the streetlights and over the concrete road guards, seemed to sink into the fountain-grasses as he climbed down the hillslope. Bhuvan strained to hear him over the surge of his own heartbeat, but the man had a light foot, he could not tell if he broke into a run. Bhuvan felt the streetlight leaching into his skin, the open sky, the sleepless eyes of the city trained out of their high-rise apartments, down at him. He imagined Baadal up there, but the image didn't fit. He ran for cover, ran into the mall.

The metrocar roars inside, silver-blue, slim as a rocket. Aftab said they ran on magnets, but Bhuvan couldn't understand how this was possible. Everything was electric, surely. That's what Phoolan had said—everything runs through wires.

Bhuvan nestles himself into a corner seat in the back, watches the pigeon-woman find a seat far in front. He counts the people getting into the car. Seven. None of them spare him a glance, even when he jumps in his seat as the car leaps out of the station. His eyes dizzy as the sky flickers in bands between the skyscrapers, palm trunks and street lights.

In Mumbai, Phoolan was the one who pulled electricity to their house. She had said it was nothing special, she'd watched the others do it, but she was not even ten back then. Their mother flicked Bhuvan's ear and said, "Good-for-nothing, like your father, look what your sister has done."

The next day, their mother walked from house to house through the neighborhood searching for Mr. Abdilrahman. He had a beard dyed red from henna that he twisted in his fingers when he thought. He had big thoughts always—that he would dedicate his life to rescuing children. That he would move from his kingdom of hills in the north to the city of crows by the sea. He thought Phoolan was a special girl. When he saw the lightbulb glow from inside their house he asked her to explain how she got it. She dragged him to the telephone pole on the street behind the house and pointed from one loop of cable to the next. Bhuvan clung to her waist, peeking from behind her at Mr. Abdilrahman's flaming beard.

Mr. Abdilrahman came back to the house, bent into the doorway and asked their mother, "How much school does your daughter have?"

He taught Phoolan to read, tested her memory from the Quran, from tours of the museums, the planetarium. She picked up languages like it was a game, Arabic script, Hindi script, English. Bhuvan barely knew what a book contained. Still, back then, he wanted to be like her. When Mr. Abdilrahman came to their house and sat cross-legged on a short stool right outside the door, Bhuvan would fold into a pensive crouch by Phoolan's side, rest his cheek on her shoulder and follow her voice, search for the shapes of words in the book on her lap before she turned the page, always too soon. He tagged along on their trips around the city, and Mr. Abdilrahman's eyes would go soft, and he'd throw the boy a question to pull him in as Phoolan raced ahead, consuming words on the walls.

“What do you think, Bhuvan,” Mr. Abdilrahman asked him once, “of the plan of sending a team of explorers to Mars?”

Bhuvan cringes as he remembers his response. Slow to reason yet quick to speak, even Aftab was irritated by the train of his thoughts.

“Teacher-sir,” Bhuvan whispers, imagining his thirteen year-old self, cheeks so round his dimples disappeared into them like pits, “I think this is the best proof that mankind is invincible.”

Mr. Abdilrahman gave him a long look. By his side, Phoolan chuffed, impatient to correct him.

“Who owns Mars?” she finally hissed. “Everyone who can look at the sky and find it, deserves it? Everyone who can build a rocketship?”

Bhuvan glances around the metrocar, realizing he is talking to himself. If anyone has noticed, they pretend not to have. Out the window, Burj Khalifa spears the sky. He once thought the view would be something to write home about, but on the phone, Phoolan dismissed him.

“Big man, are you?” she’d said on the phone. “Tell me about the men who fall from the sky instead.”

Bhuvan had said to Mr. Abdilrahman, “Teacher-sir, we have a right to own anything we have the power to take.”

This was the law of the street, he’d thought. By his teens, he had drifted from Phoolan and Mr. Abdilrahman, with their big thoughts and their conversations full of questions. He missed their father, now dead several years. While Phoolan took jobs to save money, “For my children, one day” she used to say, Bhuvan looked for work in the Gulf. That’s how his father brought them to Mumbai, from the farm to the street-side, nothing grand, but enough-full of roads and windows and doors that a boy could make up dreams. Bhuvan would say to his

mother, “One day, I’ll buy us all a house up there,” and point to the western skyline, a wall against the sea.

“You’ll become lost to us,” she’d say to him, shaking her head.

“You’ll become worthless,” Phoolan would add, if she ever heard him.

Bhuvan squints at Dubai passing below them, roads filling with shiny cars, school buses, vans carrying laborers. He peels his arm away from the window, seeing the flanks of those other men’s shoulders, capped in their blue uniforms. Not like them anymore, he thinks. He tries to imagine his father’s Dubai, same uniform, same van, though maybe no AC. His father trapped in a cage of steel thirty floors off the ground. Not so many high-rises yet, but his father would say he had built them all. Bhuvan wonders how often he thought about his family, imagined them in the houses he built.

No matter what she would say later, when their father died, Phoolan felt grief. Bhuvan knew this. It changed her. Their mother sobbed the whole time while she washed his body, but Phoolan wouldn’t cry. She was always very sharp, lips, chin, nose, elbows, knees, but when they woke up that morning to find their father’s body stiff on the floor between them, it was as if the skin tightened around her whole body. She was already preparing for the arguments people would raise, the countless times she would have to assert what she felt was her right. She helped dress the corpse and then stepped outside. Friends and neighbors had gathered to help carry the body to the crematorium.

Phoolan burned their father in Bhuvan’s place. She crouched into the house and looked around—their mother sat silent on the floor hitting her temples with her fists. Bhuvan was horrified by that most of all—that her mouth was wide open but there was no sound. Some of the neighborhood women came to sit next to her, and normally they would wail but that time, they

didn't. If the family's grief had no voice, it seemed no one else could make a sound. He huddled in the corner farthest from where the body had been. Phoolan took their father's only other pants and shirt, changed out of her own clothes.

"Look after her," she had said to him, nodding at their mother, and put her hair, long and straight and thin, into a flat bun on the top of her head. She found white cloth, he still does not know where, tied it around her head to cover her hair and joined the crematorium procession outside. He had wanted to know if they did let her set fire to the body, whether they called her "son," but he ran from the house to the marina as soon as she'd left, and by the next morning, he'd forgotten to ask.

The metrocar stops and starts, swallowing and spitting people along Dubai, and Bhuvan begins to recognize old landmarks, islands of grass and trees he remembers visiting on foot, sunlit buildings whose outlines he learned in the dark. They seem like ghosts of themselves, crystals of blue sky. At night was when they came alive, lights flaring and dimming as people moved through the rooms.

Bhuvan wonders, after staring at the night sky so long, could he at least say he belonged to it? The electric city made a ceiling of its nightlights, and some evenings Bhuvan pretended he owned everything it touched. For a while he searched for the real sky, the pin-pricked sky Mr. Abdilrahman had described. He built floor upon floor of apartments, closing the ceiling over each to raise the roof of the one above. He kept thinking he would emerge above the dome of light. When they got as high as floor 135, that July, he threw his head back and just felt ill. It was as if he was under sea, so wet and hot. No stars in the haze, moon like a sad copper coin rising and sinking between the steel girders.

He sees the moon now too, another ghost, a tablet of salt half-dissolved into blue. It hangs over the old town, where the first merchants set up their businesses and homes, where the labor camps still have not been torn down. He almost takes a picture on his phone. No. 5411, he'd point out to Phoolan, a two-storey cement block the color of hide. How could he put such an address on an envelope? How could he say, I wish to see you soon?

Right outside the walls of the camp are the high walls of an all-girls' school. Aftab said this was because their contractor couldn't find another place to put them, otherwise what sense was there keeping young men in a compound for two years without any women, right next to a building full of girls? Those girls, from Iran, they were not to Bhuvan's taste, but Aftab would stand on his balcony with a chai without fail at seven-fifty every morning to watch them get out of their school buses and cars. He would be last to reenter their room each morning, last to sleep through the day and first to rise.

Bhuvan shrugs his shoulders in practice—I do not miss them, Phoolan, not Aftab, nor Fazal or Kumar, none of the people with whom I lived. Bhuvan lifts his shirt to sniff the cloth, but none of the smells of his room are on it. He shuts his eyes as his home floods back, the tall bunk beds, the smell of Kumar's giant drum of rice in the corner, Fazal's moonshine breath. Aftab's smell of soap, like lemon zest and talcum powder, especially strong after every Friday night. Friday night, and Baadal, and if he was lucky, the whiff of her, of milk and cardamom, a tang of sharp perfume.

The room he shared with Aftab became the Welcoming place when Kumar and Fazal moved in. They had connections. They'd text pictures on their cellphones of the latest stocks. Since they were both assigned to vans no one questioned whether they drove to and from the work site, or from the goods store. No one wondered why they drove at midnight through the

heart of the old town, far from the high-rise sites, where some of the first apartment houses in the city were built.

Before those two, Aftab would walk Bhuvan through the Karama shops and they would brush past young women in tight crowds, just a finger or an elbow along an ass or a breast. Aftab, a foot taller than Bhuvan, would stand behind women at the cash registers, drop his head and inhale. He was an expert at stealing from the women what they didn't even know they were giving up. His nostrils would peel back, and he'd rock on his heels like the scent of a woman's scalp was better than the press of her skin, as if it didn't matter if she never noticed his presence.

Once, on a bus in Mumbai, Bhuvan sat staring for forty minutes at a crease that ran diagonally across a woman's buttock. She stood precariously, and when the bus jerked, the crease seemed to pinch at the skin underneath as the fabric pulled against her body. She slapped him, when her companion noticed what Bhuvan was doing.

Bhuvan looks around the metro car. No women, but at the next stop, a mother filters through with a child in tow, the kind of girl who doesn't realize that she is nubbing at the chest and will be shocked the first time she is groped on the street. Aftab would sneer when Bhuvan followed these girls. "Only virgins touch females who don't know what to do with their breasts." When the girl-child in the metro car turns to stare at Bhuvan, he coughs and pulls out his phone. He studies the keypad but at last puts it away, he has nothing to say to anyone stored inside.

As the metrocar zooms over the old-town apartments, Bhuvan wonders where the windowless houses are. The inner rooms of those apartments looked into a courtyard of sand and brick no wider than a fridge-box. Pigeons groomed on the rooftop, Baadal said, and each morning rained shit and worn feathers down the shaft. Baadal said she never saw outer windows at all, but she knew they were boarded shut so people wouldn't look in. Those houses were over

thirty years old, painted over every few years to cover up paan splatter along the corridors and doorjambs, to hide the mold that ran down the dripping ACs in each window.

Once, people like Bhuvan's father thought they might make new lives in houses like those in the old town, while they built the newer apartments, the highways, the malls. Instead of painting grey-brown-white-pink walls and ceilings they were told to paint in dove-fawn-pearl-coral. They installed blue-tinted glass, and bronze-tinted glass, double-insulation and triple-frosting. Bhuvan's father returned home with fancy tile samples in his satchel, and Bhuvan's mother tiled the family shrine with the shards.

His father must not have had the same view of the city. Not so many skyscrapers, no hint of the vast white tracks of metro-line to come, a blacker sky, a wider horizon.

Aftab and Fazal and Kumar were all night-shift boys, like Bhuvan, and their own window panes were taped over with black cardboard so they could sleep through the daylight. Aftab took it down once and the room seemed to shrink three sizes in the sudden light, all the exposed corners, the steel frames of the bunk beds, the cheap lights and curtains Fazal and Kumar had hung up to make the room Welcoming. Aftab pierced the cardboard through with a pin to form the pattern of a rose. Some mornings, when Bhuvan could not sleep, like the days after Baadal, he would watch the rose pattern on the wall opposite, mark the time of day as the sun rose, the flower slipping to the floor. Phoolan, Bhuvan thinks, I am of the firm belief now that if you cannot see the sky without any obstruction—windows, dust haze, satellite orbit—you own nothing at all.

Bhuvan could boast to Phoolan's children one day: in the houses he built, the crawl spaces were wide as footpaths, big as roads for children to run along, and if someone left a

window open, closets in each apartment with more floor-space together than most of the houses on Bhuvan's childhood streets. He throws an imaginary niece into the air and catches her, pretends to snap at her face. A wasted opportunity, he says to the child, the narrows of Dubai—a wasted opportunity, Phoolan, not to raise your children here. But Phoolan haunts him. She takes the child from his hands and says, "Tell me about the places to hide full-grown people in Dubai. Tell me, are the narrows big enough for them?"

They used to play hide-and-seek mafia in the city, when Phoolan and Bhuvan first arrived from the village. Phoolan, at seven, sharp as a crow, and he, a scruffy five-year old, watching everything she did. They could worm into any tiny gap between two tin-frame houses and get lost for the whole day while other children screamed their names. "Give up," they would cry, "I give up, show yourself now."

When they were children, Bhuvan followed Phoolan wherever she went. This was not wise, in hide-and-seek mafia, because every child took a token from a cloth bag that made them part of one team or another. Phillips or flat, when their fists closed around a piece of metal they'd run off. Last person standing with the bag became don, picked up a screw and began his hunt. Children lurked and swooped through the narrows, looking for the others. Each find a gamble, a quick flash of the screw, and if the screws didn't match, it was a race to put two fingers to the other person's neck. Gunshot, knife cut, whatever the child imagined. It was best to find teams, hide together, but to trust someone enough to reveal that screw in their fist made it so that not many of the children ever did.

Bhuvan's head rattles against the metrocar's window. He rubs his eyes, reminds himself it is not yet half a day since his escape. Aftab has said nothing over the phone. Baadal must have been driven back to the old town by Fazal. When she came out of the foreman's office, last

evening, she wiped her mouth before saying to Bhuvan, “Your passport and your ticket home.” Aftab followed behind, hand on her back. He patted the block-shaped bulge in his pants pocket.

In hide-and-seek mafia, as a team working together, the children could spread out and kill the other team faster. They learned to torture each other to find hiding locations. They could seek out the don by bribing his underlings. For children, it was complicated gambling.

Phoolan played different odds. She let Bhuvan follow her and when they were both in a safe place they’d open their hands and compare screws. She would let him run away if they were on opposite teams. If they were on the same team, she’d never let him go first when confronting someone. She’d never pitch him against an opponent even though they’d have better odds of subduing someone if he, squealing, tackled someone while she dove from behind. She always made her kills alone.

But things began to change. After their father’s first return from Dubai, when he’d disappear nights and return mornings smelling of hooch and bitter perfume, she’d narrow her eyes, watch him smile about memories he’d made outside of their house. She’d watch their mother’s face, first stricken, then withdrawn. After their father’s second return, when he brought back toy-metal jewelry for his wife and daughter, and a calculator watch for his son, Phoolan buried the jewelry in the dirt behind their house.

Two months after, during the game, when Bhuvan followed her as usual she turned and snapped at him, “Grow up.” She ran in the opposite direction then, back where they had come from, back to the bag of screws. Though Bhuvan was in shock, he did not try to catch up. It was as if she had slapped him. Besides, what she was doing now was reckless, returning to where others would run in to her. But then Phoolan won five games in a row. He realized no one

expected her to play foolishly. She lurked in the wide-open while others killed each other off, attacked the last one standing when they were most confident of having won.

Before the others figured out Phoolan's scheme, she stopped playing altogether. She got her first job, in an electrical shop in Mr. Abdilrahman's neighborhood. Then she got a second job in a food grinder's. Then a third. After a while Bhuvan lost count. She bought gold bangles with the money so she could wear them at all times, then went to a metalsmith and asked him to tarnish the bangles so they wouldn't look like gold. Bhuvan once joked with her that she would scare off all the men if she wore her dowry on her arms and she said, "Tsst-tsst," like he was still a child. By the time their father died, Phoolan dismissed everything he said out of habit, it seemed. "You are too naïve to understand," she would say, without explaining what she meant.

When Bhuvan turned nineteen he asked her for the loan of three of her bangles to help with a job. Of course she couldn't say no. It was only when he showed their mother his freshly made passport that Phoolan came over and said, "Where are you going?"

"Following our father," he answered.

Bhuvan still remembers how Phoolan's face twitched. They sat on their haunches staring at each other. Their mother sat between, thumbing slowly through the empty pages of his new passport, tracing the passport number pierced on the bottom margin.

"I cannot be like you. Mr. Abdilrahman will not take me as his disciple, and if I sit in this hut you can just as well plan my wedding and hand my dowry off to the girl."

"But this is your home," she said to him.

"You have no idea what that means," he snapped.

She chose not to fight about it. But from then on until Bhuvan left six months later she would propose every other day some job around the city. New laundry business opened up.

Delivery boy for an old boss's food business. Construction work on some luxury towers right by the marina. Nothing doing. By then Bhuvan had heard all the stories from the other Gulf workers about money conversion and travelling and how Thursday-Friday nights were best of all if he knew the right people. He heard a man could walk under palm trees and pick dates right off them and they would come apart in the mouth like cotton candy soaked in honey. He heard if he built one of those record-breaking towers he could look down onto streetlights like ropes of gold stretching in every direction, floating even on top of the inky waters of the Gulf. He heard there was every shape and color of woman on the streets there, and he could have his choice of them.

He heard the work would break his back, the boss-men would take his passports, the heat would make him vomit, the money would be late, and the housing cramped even for animals.

But he looked around his house, at Phoolan slinking out the door early mornings to one of her several jobs. Their mother, who sewed buttons and seams by the light coming in the door. His father had died before telling him how he became a man, and if Bhuvan didn't leave now, even his footsteps would be erased from the sand, those footsteps pointing to the waters west. Even Phoolan understood that. Before Bhuvan left for the airport she stuck his hand into their father's leather satchel and made him feel the two round coins sewn into the lining. Two more of her bangles, melted down.

"Remember to come back home," she said.

Bhuvan could tell Phoolan, I learned some things about houses in my new job. I can now talk economics with you and Mr. Abdilrahman, and you'll have to agree with me because I've seen it all. For instance, he'd explain, I understand that you can put up a house on plywood and cement blocks with a hole in it for an AC and a wire outlet for a tubelight, and outside you can

have a pipe and a bucket and a mug, and a bit farther off you can have a keyhole toilet, and six people can live in a room like that if they lie on top of each other in bunk beds. You can replicate this style of house as fast as you can replicate the cement blocks, and the more people you put in one place, the more efficiently you split your resources. Such is the economics of the metroplex, he'd say, and he'd sit back while Phoolan and Mr. Abdilrahman processed this.

Bhuvan remembers when he first arrived, at dinner time in the mess hall, the other men's stories. There was a school by the beach, with pink sandstone walls. A man from Kerala told this story. His cousin studied chemistry in the south and moved to Dubai to work in that school and they made him live in a house under the bleachers outside the football field. The men could enter through the maintenance door that led to the AC, plumbing, fuse-boxes. They'd pass along the left wall, because the right sloped down with the bleachers, upside down grey steps, and at the end the wall was punched through with holes. That stone-lattice design. Mr. Abdilrahman always wondered whether it was the Mughals or the Persians or the Arabs who invented the pattern, but it was not just in the postcards of palaces anymore. Now, any architect with a dream and a setsquare would make the bathroom tiles look like sacred mosque-murals, would make the bleacher walls look like peepshow screens in a high-class brothel.

To the right of the once-chemistry student from Kerala slept the school's gatekeeper, a man from Lucknow by way of some woebegone village. On his left slept one of the cafeteria cooks, from somewhere of likewise little importance. The gardener was for certain from across the border—Bhuvan no longer remembers whether east or west—but heat, the great equalizer, made them all brothers in sweat.

In the school's lab, this once-chemistry student, smelling of soap and hair cream, with freshly trimmed mustache and nails, would look at the teenage boys and girls, who wore ripped

uniforms and unbuffed shoes, who played with the Bunsen burners and pipettes like they were unafraid of cuts or burns, and he would mutter to himself, “Punks.” He would prepare small vials of diluted acid and base for the other once-chemistry student, this one from Ireland, who had been given a job as professor in this school. The professor slept in an apartment in the business district, where his walls did not slope to the floor.

An old man, from Lahore, he was the first to explain to Bhuvan about the government housing in the old town. Nobody appeared to live in some of those oldest apartments now but the electricity ran there, and the water. Still no one had demolished the apartments to put in a park or a mall. “Frankly,” the old man said, “I think we don’t need any more shopping malls. I built them all and I’m done with them.”

Bhuvan wonders if he could get away with such bravado with Phoolan. The creek that passes below the metro, the souk on the other side, could he say to her he built those too? Nothing in this city, Aftab believed, would have existed if not for restless men like them. The airports, the seaports, the camps, the hidden houses, everything built to accommodate builders like them.

The metrocar sweeps past the one museum, an old fort, lonely in a sea of markets and apartments, renovated to tell the story of Dubai. Aftab told him it was built before he was born. Bedouins sick of traveling. The walls of the fort were made from sand and seashells cemented together. Underneath, a meandering basement lined with dioramas and videos explained, though not in such words, that the British supplied guns and cannons in exchange for pearls and gold and land for a military base camp and, thus, the Bedouins built an empire. They dug for gold into the earth, and it pitched out black and viscous and endless, and changed the shape of this world.

Mr. Abdilrahman knew this already, the dates and names and other details. Phoolan, if she took the trouble, could probably recite the history of Dubai from a book. But every time she thought of people like their father, people building houses for other people, she wanted to spit. Before, Bhuvan didn't understand this, but now he does not blame her.

Inside the museum is a model home built from palm leaves and imported timber from Iran. Or maybe from India, who knew. Nothing like that sort of house anymore. Now, Bhuvan hears they are importing trees from far north, with leaves and snowflakes still clinging to the twigs. Christmas decorations. Maybe the airplanes were refrigerated to keep the snowflakes fresh. When he told Baadal about this new snow, she said it was not possible, it came from the clouds, and that was that. But she had been here longer than he and had yet never seen Burj Khalifa, a building so large its ACs made waterfalls from humidity, to water the ground for a mile in each direction. She had not seen the cotton-candy-honey dates or the bright green grass, so what could she say about what was or was not possible. Bhuvan had seen it, Bhuvan knew.

Far off in the desert, where the metro does not go yet, they are building more city. There, the buildings are still grey and brown. Cement block and plywood and white paint, the old style. There, Phoolan, is a single store for family goods, a simple mosque painted green, fifty-sixty labor camps in grid formation, and lines scored in the sand that you can see from the moon. New-town, it will be called, when the lines are finally filled in. The family goods store sells plastic footballs and nylon yellow-green tee-shirts from China that make you look like Pél e, and basketball caps that say I "heart" NY, and plastic dolls with blue eyes and white-gold hair and pink dresses.

What Bhuvan does not add is that in the back, under the counters and inside blank cardboard boxes, they sell women's underwear, red-colored and black-colored and even flesh-

colored, so a man could pretend, perhaps, that his fantasy woman was wearing nothing but her skin. The best part, Bhuvan thinks, about this skeleton city in the desert, the best part is such a joke I can never tell you at all. But you already knew, didn't you? Walking the bone-streets of new-New Dubai, you will see young to old men dressed in Pakistani salwar kurtas of sky blue and dark blue and green and brown and white. You will see Indian men in brown pants and blue pants and grey pants and Pél  tee-shirts because their white shirts and pink shirts got dirty. You will see five-to-six Arab men mop their foreheads with silk handkerchiefs and pick up the hems of their white dishdashas before getting into their Mercedes and returning to old-New Dubai because the work is going on schedule. You will see no women in this city at all.

Aftab always said they were lucky to have such comfortable rooms in Camp No. 5411. They had good bossmen, he would point out, every time he came out of the shower smelling like lemons. He'd rub a rough towel over his pale shoulders and between his legs, and then wrap the towel round his head like a turban. He'd go to the one mirror affixed in the bathroom, opposite from all the shower stalls, and peel dry skin off his nose. His nose was sharp and pointed, and he had cats' eyes that would narrow as he concentrated to pinch at it. "They fix things when they are broken," he'd say, as he ran the faucets and splashed water over his face.

Even though they worked night shifts, Aftab always had a sunburn. One month after Bhuvan's arrival he decided to follow him around instead of going to sleep. They drank chai on the balcony and Aftab pointed out Parisa from the Iranian school. Surely she was no more than eighteen, though she walked like a wiser woman. She climbed out of the school bus and looked around at the street. She looked up at them. Bhuvan shakes his head. No, she looked right up at Aftab and rolled her eyes at him. Then she adjusted her clothes, buttoned her collar up to the

chin, pulled down her scarf and tucked a perfect chocolate fountain of hair off her forehead and behind the folds of cloth. She stepped through the gates of the school and they watched her body swing from side to side as she disappeared into a building.

“Fairy, she is, that’s why I know her name is Parisa,” Aftab sighed. He pulled his turban off his head and flicked it like a whip and then draped it across his shoulders. He swung chai dregs down his throat and said, “Come,” so Bhuvan went with him.

He took him on a tour of the workmen’s Dubai. Karama was like a small India, Bhuvan could explain, lots like the South, Kerala or Chennai. He felt satisfaction in knowing this now—their father’s stories had little of these details, little to hook someone with Phoolan’s imagination, who expected facts, who expected more from people than what they were equipped to give.

Aftab had come to Dubai on two-three rounds of work already, so he had also lived in Deira and Bur Dubai. He said Deira felt more like Islamabad, Bur Dubai more like Mumbai. Cosmopolitan, he said. Karama was a mix of gold shops run by Malayalis and shoe shops run by Phillipinos, and market shops selling fish and rambutans and coconuts and saffron, and everything a person needed to run a kitchen good as home. Better than home. There were shop owners who could quote the price of any food and tell customers all about how plump and juicy the flesh was in seventeen-eighteen languages, Hindustani to Arabic to Tagalog to Russian. This would not impress Phoolan as much as it impressed him, he had never had such a gifted tongue.

He wondered if that’s why Aftab took him in, because he seemed so young. On that first round of Karama, he barely remembered a thing, his muscles throbbed from lifting cement bags and lining steel girders. He swayed with sleep, so Aftab took his hand and led him through the city pointing out his favorite places to get shoes fixed, or eat shawarma, or drink coffee. He pressed a small cup of Suleimani chai in Bhuvan’s hand when it was around midday. He drank

something with mint in it. They crossed a highway in peak traffic to get to a grass island. He waved at the gardeners tending the sprinklers and they waved at him. He must have done this every day. He took Bhuvan to a ghaf tree in the center of the grass island, its branches grey and limp as old hair. He parted the hair and threw down his towel on the sand by the foot of the tree. “Come,” he said, “take a nap.”

They must have slept for hours, because when they awoke, Aftab’s face was shiny and red, and Bhuvan’s back was damp with sweat. Aftab showed him a trick where he bent the hose of a dripline feeding the flower bushes lining the grass island, used the sudden gush of water to wet his face and neck. He bought them shawarmas for nighttime breakfast, and they got home just in time for him to shower again, just in time to board the vans back to the work site.

Though Bhuvan did not understand why Aftab looked after him, he accepted his help without question. He followed his orders without remorse. Aftab gave him crushed powders to snort or lick off the back of his hand. Bhuvan took them like medicine. “Dr. Aftab-ji, I thank you,” he’d slur after swallowing. They set his head on fire, made car lights and shop lights and arc welding lights leave trails like fireworks caught in oil. He enjoyed his vision streaked with such electric light. It made months pass like days.

Bhuvan stretches his legs and transfers lines, less than an hour left till the airport. He pats the phone in his pocket, from his first savings. A fancy phone with lights down the sides and a ringtone like a gun going off. The phone is silenced now, of course, that was Aftab’s first advice to him, before they decided they would run. Phoolan has not called in months, but when he first had the phone, she would call every week. Fridays, which became busier after the Welcoming

Room parties, were the worst time for Phoolan to call, because her questions turned sharp and all-knowing the more he decided not to explain.

She demanded speaking to Aftab once, after she figured out about his powders and midday strolls. Bhuvan blushes as he remembers hanging up the phone. How Aftab said her voice was like a train whistle. How they laughed. He was twenty by then, thought he knew it all. Aftab asked if she looked as pretty as Bhuvan did, and he obliged by putting a towel round his head, shaking his hips and speaking in a high lilt.

Phoolan would text instead of call. If Bhuvan felt rested he would sometimes call back. Every day, before he slept, a movie played in his head of his hands holding and turning the night's equipment. His body would twitch like he was still at work. He woke up every two-three hours and marked Aftab's pierced nose, sinking lower, down the doors of the Godrej bureau, which had a fancy lock on it though there were no valuables inside. The foreman held their passports and any big cash, "For your own safety from each other, you thugs," he'd say with a smile.

Aftab smiled back, said "We have good bossmen," and Bhuvan would nod without giving it a thought.

Aftab would go out and come home every day, his grey eyes red-rimmed. Every other day Bhuvan would go out with him, but he could barely keep up. He wondered where Aftab got his energy, if perhaps his body was somehow blessed.

A year passed and Phoolan said their mother was ill. Bhuvan didn't know what to do. Truth was, he didn't know if it mattered. He had changed, he realizes now, so far from the place where he'd grown up. He wonders if those strong connections with family were for show. Like how Aftab pretended to care for him, for lack of anything else to do. Maybe, he will explain to

Phoolan, the blood curdles, scabs over when you tear yourself away from your home. Aftab became my brother, Phoolan, I needed him then. I'd give him half my money and he gave me medicines and chai and even my first taste of beer. All you gave were lectures, so I stopped answering the phone.

“You have no sense of duty,” she pronounced, when he said he wouldn't come home. Their mother needed someone to sit by her side all day and night. She needed someone to feed and change her. Bhuvan understood what Phoolan really meant. She had made her own money since she was thirteen-fourteen, had too much pride to ask for some of his. Wouldn't borrow from Mr. Abdilrahman, her friend and her teacher. She said, “If you came back and got married, at least, you could leave your wife at home. Get stoned and pass out on the marina like our father. But leave someone behind to hold up the house.”

Bhuvan sent her money. Wire transfer, Aftab showed him how. She called back and asked if it was from the work he did with “those men, in that room.” Bhuvan didn't answer. She made him listen as she kindled a tiny fire in their house, as she shoved pieces of paper into the flames.

Kumar and Fazal were purely businessmen. They were mated, it seemed, and Aftab mistrusted them for a few weeks after they moved in, on fresh contracts, to take up the newly emptied beds in the rose-pierced room. It took him a while to realize they didn't want anyone but each other. After that it took him mere minutes to agree that they knew what guys like Aftab rather wanted. A few minutes on Kumar's phone, flipping through picture messages. Aftab's eyes shone in the light of the small screen. “Three times I've come here and this is the first camp

I've lived in with guys like you," he said hoarsely. "What a joke that you have such connections and no need for the services."

Bhuvan watched clueless as they rearranged the room. "First of all," Kumar said, scratching his stomach, "we must get some curtains. Some flower vases. Fazal is bringing the TV and radio. This whole room, we can make rent off it, if we just make it attractive enough."

"Just need some private places," Fazal said. He stroked his nails. They were painted red, but chipped from work. He had other colors. Green, gold, black. Bhuvan came to expect the smell of polish and remover on Thursdays, the smell of Fazal's distill-breath the day after.

Kumar and Fazal drove their van through town looking for thick cotton cloth, colored dark green. "It is the fashion," Fazal said, and they made curtains for the bunk beds, so each became its own compartment. They brought ropes of small lightbulbs, all different colors.

Bhuvan asked what those were for.

"Diwali, love," Kumar said, throwing him a kissing face.

Kumar negotiated the split of profits for the room with Aftab. Bhuvan didn't know the numbers. Maybe 60-40 in their favor, since he and Aftab had nothing to do with starting the business.

The first Thursday night, Fazal swapped transport van keys with the grocery van guy and drove off with Kumar into Old Karama in the windowless supplies van, returned before dawn on Friday, right before the nightshift ended. The van was parked in the sandlot between the Iranian school and the camp, everyone already inside. Aftab took Bhuvan aside. Pulled out his phone and programmed in a warming message.

“Today, you must see that the foreman doesn’t come anywhere higher than the first floor,” he said. “Pretend you are drunk and fall on him if you must, but push this button before he is able to come upstairs.” He handed Bhuvan back his phone.

Bhuvan cringes, remembering his response. He had actually asked Aftab, “Is this like a spying thing?” He thought he had skills to share, of being able to hide in small spaces, to be ruthless, to tackle and kill. He had watched his sister do these things. He thought he had learned.

“This is a business,” Aftab had said. “And every business needs guards.”

Before climbing upstairs to their room again, he gave Bhuvan some of his drugs for staying awake, and a thermos flask of beer.

That first day of business, about five-six people asked where the Welcoming Room was. Tiptoed up the stairs as the sun broke. Bhuvan tuned into the radio on his phone. Three weeks in, there were a dozen or more people asking for the room. He heard music from upstairs, the same station as was on his phone. Bhuvan licked a fingertip and scribbled drawings on the tile stairs in the dust. People came and went all day, because Fridays were break day, and there was nothing else to do but eat and drink and smoke and pick fights over cricket on TV. They fought fast and quiet, because no one wanted the foreman to come.

After sunset prayers, Aftab would come downstairs, smelling washed, hair still wet. “Good boy,” he said, and took Bhuvan up to the roof. Kumar on the stairwell would nod at them, smoking a small cigarette. On the roof, in a plastic barrel under some sackcloth behind the AC room, was some new alcohol from orange juice, concocted by Fazal. It burned going down and burned more coming up. Bhuvan’s eyes would water as he watched Fazal’s white van leaving the lot.

It occurs to Bhuvan that perhaps this sort of stuff is always happening, and he looks down at the traffic below the metro line, the number of cars with smokescreen windows, the number of vans without windows at all. He looks into apartment complexes, the ones strung with colored lights, fancy curtains. His eyes water as he thinks how many signs he'd missed.

Aftab must have taken pity on Bhuvan's inexperience, because at last, after two months of service on the stairs, he finally came down early, took away Bhuvan's phone and shoved him up the stairs with a few dirham notes instead. Fazal guarded the door to their room. "Discount rate," he said, rolling his eyes at the notes Bhuvan shakily gave him.

There were three women in the room. Two on Kumar and Fazal's side, smoking cigarettes. A tall one with pear-shaped hips and breasts like buds. A rounder woman with her hair in a disheveled bun, cheeks dotted with scars like oil had burst across her face. And then, on the other side of the room, Baadal, made of twigs, with skin like milk. Bhuvan sat beside her and tucked his legs in as she drew the green curtains closed.

Bhuvan would like to imagine that the string of lights behind the curtains made her eyes shine like stars, but if he had to be perfectly honest with Phoolan about their first meeting, this was not true at all. Baadal wasn't even awake the first time, her eyes were shut, and she moaned when he tried to shake her by the shoulder. It was he who'd pulled the curtains back, invited himself to her side. "Baadal is exhausted," one of the women called out, but he shut the curtains on them.

He lay next to the girl—after all, she was in his own bed—moved his hand from her shoulder to the dip in her back, above her buttocks, finally thrust it into her hair. The shafts of it were thicker than his own, but straight and black. He fell asleep with his lips pressed into the back of her neck. When he woke up next it was time to work, and his bed was empty of warmth.

Bhuvan realizes he cannot tell Phoolan anything about Baadal, because she will want to ask him everything, just to shame him. She will ask about what he did and what she did and what they did when he finally saved enough to afford the full rate. But that was private information. Even between brother and sister. Here is something, Phoolan, he thinks, somewhere around my twenty-first birthday, five women did a dance in my honor at the Welcoming Room, and for five minutes I forgot everything about the weight of my own body. Aftab paid them to do it, as a brother would.

The next week Baadal showed Bhuvan what she had bought with her money, a small magazine full of comics and crossword puzzles and short stories about detectives and dangerous women. She bought it from one of the men who'd been with her the hour before. "Used to be my brother's favorite," she whispered.

Sometimes, the room was for public gatherings, full of music, radio on full blast and everybody giggling and smiling. They all spoke in their mother tongues and sometimes there were so many languages in the room that only one or two people understood what-all was said. What really was there to say, Bhuvan wonders. "You are my heartbeat," for sentimental liars. "Careful, that pinches," for the ones who knew business from pleasure. The women's earrings and chains would clink, a light, toy-metal sound. And Bhuvan would request to go last, because then he could sleep after, and someone else would carry Baadal or another girl out of the bed. They were veiled and bundled into the van in the narrow hours, between sleep and waking. Bhuvan slept like a stone till Aftab would shake him for work.

Bhuvan only told Baadal, when the news came that his mother had died. She paused, and then sat hugging her knees. "How old was she?" she said.

"Old enough to die young?"

He apologized. That was something Phoolan would have said. She had sounded far away on the phone, her throat clenched like concrete hardening.

“You would make a good daughter-in-law, I think,” he then said.

Baadal snorted. “They won’t take me back now.”

That night, they tried to remember the names of all their family members, touching from fingertips to knuckle joints to elbows to each nugget of the spine as they went back and back into the past.

Aftab once asked Bhuvan if he was enjoying himself, on one of their usual balcony mornings, looking down at his Parisa. Bhuvan nodded.

“Is it not the most strange comfort,” Aftab said all of a sudden, “when the women leave, how they leave their smiles behind in the room?”

Bhuvan didn’t know what to say to this. It was one of those questions with a trick answer, the kind that Phoolan and Mr. Abdilrahman sparred with. Aftab would get into these questioning moods, and then be distracted for many days, staring off at the skyscrapers rising past Karama. He would work like a robot in such moods, finish faster than all the others and climb as high as he could onto a building platform, sit there until the shift was done.

“You are a simple creature,” he said to Bhuvan when he had no answers, and not ask him another question for days.

Phoolan stopped calling altogether, and Bhuvan did not notice until his phone cracked on the pavement. Aftab insisted on fixing it, even though Bhuvan protested he had no use for it any more. “This is currency, you fool,” Aftab snapped at him. Bhuvan wonders now if he always had known what that phone could do.

They walked past a tailor shop, a buttons-zips-fabric shop, a fake designer products shop, to an electronics goods store wedged in a small room between two shoe shops. The men inside were from Afghanistan, and Aftab busily discussed the cost of fixing the phone bits in a broken version of their language. Bhuvan idled next door, picking up shoes and putting them down. He watched shoppers on the street, tourists, locals, residents, laborers like himself. Even in the metro, they're identical, he thinks, looking around at the latest crop of passengers. Families of various sizes, but the laborers always alone. Even in their uniforms, sitting in pairs, flanks of them in vans, always alone.

Bhuvan decides he will confess to Phoolan that his work did haunt him like she said it would. These last months, he slept in the vans to and from work, his chin bobbing with every swerve on the highway, and he became lost in circling dreams. In them, he built rooms stacked inside rooms inside rooms, like steel nests lined in concrete. The walls expanded so there was always more space to build another. Baadal jerked in and out of view, lying on the floor, sitting braiding her hair, filling crosswords, drawing windows on the concrete walls with mascara.

He missed his father. Wondered which part of Dubai he had lived in, his favorite tea shop, his sleeping habits. Who his Baadal was, whether it hurt to leave her behind. Perhaps it was obvious why Phoolan always took their mother's side. She could not know how it was to feel like Bhuvan did, though his father would surely have understood.

Phoolan would point to Mr. Abdilrahman, who would never have done what their father did. But all fathers were not the same, Bhuvan could say. Some leave gaps in the bricks as they build up their walls.

Some months before, Baadal had told him that wasn't her real name, that it was the name of a horse her father found in a rainstorm when it was just a foal. They spent the night mopping

rain from its coat, as the creature shivered and wailed. Her father used it to pull along his cart, to transport farmers' produce to the trading port, to take Baadal to school when she could afford to go. It fell into such a routine that when Baadal first disappeared from home, she wondered about it, whether the horse and her father took the same paths to school, following the ghost of her body out of habit, not realizing she was actually gone.

When Baadal said, "I sometimes wonder if it was better for the foal to have died in the storm," Bhuvan thought he knew exactly what she meant.

"We are both like horses," he said to her.

She looked around the Welcoming Room, measuring it with her eyes, and said, "Only four people live here normally, do they? You are fucking fat horses, then."

That weekend, Bhuvan tried to call Phoolan, but she wouldn't answer. He tried every week for several weeks, but there was no response. Perhaps, he thought, she had written him off for good. In September came a freak thunderstorm. Bhuvan stood on the roof that Friday and let it soak his skin. The moment the sun rose, the ground would bake like pottery again, but for that moment at least it smelled like home.

When he went down to Baadal later, Bhuvan felt like the rain had broken a dam inside his body. He asked her endless questions in whispers. Baadal could barely keep up—do you have your passport, do you know where you are kept, do you know how many you've been with, do they treat you kindly—to all these questions, she said, "No."

Bhuvan shuts his eyes. Phoolan asks the question for him, "Did she think you were special?" Bhuvan whispers Baadal's answer, "No."

Baadal finally put a finger to Bhuvan's lips. "There's the sound of a mosque five times a day. I have tried to pray, but it does not help. I have tried to stare at the ceiling, pretending it is

the surface of the moon. The tile floor, I shut my eyes and pretend it is ice. It warms and melts my cheeks. These lights,” she pointed at the roof above the bed, “they are like stars, they go out every time you thrust.”

She said there were sometimes tip-offs, sometimes raids. When she first arrived, she dared to hope. But the foremen and the madams and the landlords and the police, they would shake hands creased with paper, and it would be like nothing had happened, so work could continue on schedule.

Bhuvan sees, at last, the airport in the distance. Planes suspended in the sky like a chain of splinters. He practices his explanation to Phoolan, All I wanted was to hold someone. After all the day’s work, this was the only solace, the press of someone’s body against his own, their breath like waves against the shore of his neck.

Bhuvan is jostled into a press of people and their suitcases, exiting the metrocar like it will trap them if they wait. Baadal said she slept twelve to a room. That she understood what it meant, to have the habit of someone’s touch. He throws a glance backward before stepping into the airport. Burj Khalifa, a grey blade cutting into the sky. When they raised the roof of the apartments on floor 135, Bhuvan looked at the face of the cold copper moon, the yellow ceiling of light, the sky trapped beyond. He held on to a girder and gagged. Aftab caught him before he could fall.

Just once, the foreman came to the Welcoming Room. Word spread, as it would. He sent Fazal and Kumar out, shut the door to speak with the women. They waited in the passageway, Kumar, Fazal, Aftab, and Bhuvan. Their salaries had been docked for a week, a token punishment. The foreman left quietly some hours later, though there had been thumps and groans

while he was inside. When Aftab next tried to enter the room, Baadal's little arm shot out, shoved him backward and pushed the door shut again. A half hour later, as Fazal went downstairs to start the van, the women walked out, silent, fully dressed again. Aftab held Baadal's chin up as she took her veil from him, dropped it over her face. In the dim light of the doorway, Bhuvan saw the purple pressmarks round her neck.

Phoolan, I asked Aftab to help me get home, Bhuvan says. You might like him just a little for this kindness. The airline ticket seller catches him muttering, "What's that you're wanting?" she brusquely asks.

Bhuvan shakes his head, passes money across the counter. The woman frowns at it, loose bills instead of a card, and wipes a forgery pen across five different notes. Bhuvan barely notices. It is not until he has walked away from the counter with his ticket home that he realizes he ought to have panicked. It was the first time since his escape someone had suspected his intentions.

I am lying to myself, Bhuvan thinks. Aftab did not save me, he needed someone to stand guard. Someone to pin if things went wrong. If any man was tired of running through the motions of habit, it surely was Aftab, whose entire routine was a mask.

Bhuvan tries to enter the security gates, but is waved away. "Look at the time," the guard says, pointing at his ticket and then his wrist. Bhuvan wears no watch. He pulls his phone out, hides it again like it might go off.

Last month, we started another mall, he thinks, practicing conversations about inconsequential things. But then he remembers, the retching feeling, looking at the guts of the building at the basement level, unfinished, ceiling still curing, waiting to be sealed over. Perhaps he would sound wise, when he said to Phoolan, there was something about making a house that was exactly like the growth of a tree. Like a stepladder to heaven, he nodded at an invisible Mr.

Abdilrahman, who he believes would have liked the allusion. Those feet secured in muck, the shabby tangle of wires and girders. I much prefer, if you force me to choose, the building of rooftops. Then, you are above the building in its entirety. You can spit at the clouds, you can spit at the ambling bodies below. This mall, for instance, the last one I helped to build, would have a roof of glass studded with small electronics. Like in a mobile-phone, Aftab had explained. They would advertise the future, when they were finished, electric lights in clear glass, so people could look up to be reminded of what to buy.

Bhuvan remembers his own act of kindness, his only one, after agreeing with Aftab and Baadal what they had to do to secure their escape. He bought her a carton-full of magazines, some about horses, some not. He snuck a map of Karama inside one, a single star marked on it. “This is where I was kept,” he marks Camp No. 5411. He hopes she will figure out the rest.

When Phoolan was three, Bhuvan one, their mother packed them up to follow their father into the city. Phoolan claims her mother was grim, worked through their old house like a silent machine, as if speaking was now beyond the point. Their father had decided their fates. She packed their things tightly. Wrapped her two saris and two blouses and Phoolan’s two shifts, and Bhuvan’s two diapers made from old torn blouses all into cotton fists, stuck them into the bottom of a cloth bag. Tucked the kitchen vessels over the cloth, bowl nesting inside bowl inside kettle inside pan. Three baby’s fists of paper-wrapped salt and mustard and ground chilies. She gave the whole bag to Phoolan and then she carried Bhuvan. She had no dowry jewelry to wear because their father had already sold it to set up their house on the street. Phoolan would recite this story to Bhuvan when he had nightmares, as a child. Their mother’s breath rose and fell

beside them, and both children knew from the speed of it that she was not asleep. She never corrected Phoolan's story, so Bhuvan supposed it must have been true.

Phoolan said when they arrived in Mumbai their mother looked around at the houses next door, across the street, the small lane in between where occasionally an auto would trundle through. Boys and girls rode three-four to a bike, clinging off handlebars and the rack over the back tire. She said nothing about all this. She put Bhuvan down in the center of their new house and made Phoolan sit with him and tied her hair into a tight bun at the back of her neck and went to ask her new neighbors where she could find coals, where she could fill a pail with water.

Phoolan played a game with him to keep him from crying, handed him a marigold flower, fallen from someone's hair or temple offering onto the street. Bhuvan handed the flower back, and she returned it to him, and he handed it back, so she returned it again. Bhuvan would protest that surely such a simple game could not have entertained him. She said that wasn't true. She said the only thing a small child wants is know that the pattern would not be broken. "That is how you learned to trust me," she said.

Their mother would say to her neighbors, when she thought they couldn't hear, "I know my husband goes to the whores where he works."

She would say, "I know he got this house for free."

To Mr. Abdilrahman she confessed, "If my children would only believe in some god, perhaps they could redeem their father's behavior."

Mr. Abdilrahman said, "God will have us all answer, some day."

Phoolan yelled at them both, "God is a dumb-mute," and their mother whacked her on the head.

Bhuvan hopes Mr. Abdilrahman visited their house while their mother was dying. He believes he must have. He would have sat by her, twisting a string of beads in one hand, whispering softly. He believes it gave his mother comfort to hear some man's voice that was kind, that only wanted for her to rest.

The biggest charade ever, it is of departure. Bhuvan's ticket, the earliest he could afford, is still half a day away, and so he wanders the airport, listing things to include the account of his exit tour. The men's room next to the food court outside the security area smells foul, of orange-lemon soap used to scrub the floors, and artificial flower soap to wash hands. He spends two hours in one of the stalls, because he cannot yet check in, and does not want to be outside.

He will have to explain to Phoolan, it is not because he is hiding still, but really just so he doesn't have to see the parade of suitcases and everyone hugging. Did she know it was possible to hug someone with one hand while talking into a mobile-phone in the other? It was true, he had seen it with his own eyes. He watched a machine outside the security area tightly bind a man's belongings in plastic. A suitcase containing halwas and dates and cd players. A cardboard carton containing a fridge, and inside the fridge, a pad of clothes, to save packing space in the suitcase for dates and halwas and cd players. Bhuvan had none of these things in his satchel. He had none of the things he wanted. The boxes came off the wrapper-machine like from a cotton candy-machine, spiraling, shiny sheets of plastic that started out clear but became mirror-white as they stuck to each other, layer upon layer, gluing precious suitcase contents all together so only a knife could hack through.

Bhuvan stays in the bathroom stall nipping the skin around his nails and licking the blood away. He breathes through his mouth so he doesn't have to smell the perfumes, the disenfectants,

the soap and sweat. He wants nothing more to do with smells, they bring back too many memories. Outside, there are women clothed in smells, suntan lotion and anti-wrinkling cream and anti-sweat powder and massage oil. They must have spent their entire morning rubbing it all in, between their toes, under their breasts. The men are worse, they smell of expensive spices that make him sneeze, and their hair is gelled so hard Bhuvan imagines it could grate fruit. It is all too unnecessary, too much now to take in.

At this moment, Bhuvan is afraid of two things. One is, of course, his sister's reproach. She would chastise him for leaving his only family behind. She would chastise him for using Baadal to aid his own escape. But what can he say? As he walks through the security gates at last, he wonders what the heavy-lidded guards see as they sway their wands over his body. His heart feels like a bomb, his teeth are clenched so tight he can hear the muscles keening in his ears. The wands only pick up static. One of the guards pats his limbs, between his legs. Bhuvan tries not to flinch.

There are speed lanes in the passport control room, one for nationals, one for holders of continental passports. Everything else is for everyone else, and ninety percent of the room is filled with people like him, from Mumbai, Islamabad, Colombo, all the cities of the crows. There are laborers and merchants and businessmen. There are no whores. But they have to get in and out somehow, so tell me, Phoolan will ask him, how do you think this happens? Bhuvan could tell her that story, which he learned from Baadal, except he left her behind. He has her face frozen in his phone. The foreman's face also. Neither wears clothes, and they are tangled in a position that in this country is punishable by death. Bhuvan never saw a man's face turn so pale. The foreman looked at Aftab like suddenly he was the biggest man in the room, holding that phone, leering at his puppets.

Bhuvan spends thirty-forty minutes in the passport line while the speed lanes race past, dull-faced women in beehive scarves and mascara stamping speed-lane passports with ok-go signs. Bhuvan hates the people in the speed lanes only slightly less than the people who surround him, the children with black fountain-top ponytails and sneakers with light bulbs in the heels, their fat parents and grandparents who unconsciously pat their wallets or the jewelry round their necks to see if it is still there. He used to believe if he didn't take, people would take from him, but when he feels the weight of this ticket home in his pockets, pixels and paper, a life unspooled, he knows that he was wrong. He hates the people around him for touch-checking their worth, for thinking they wore anything important enough to be robbed. He wants to scream at them, Why did you come? Why do keep coming like sleepwalkers, swallowing gold and oil and leaving heavy with those toxins in your blood only to come back again, and back again with your sleepwalking children?

They travel in a lump of bodies along conveyor belts for a lifetime, the airport is that large, until they are deposited in the duty free zone. Here, Bhuvan is left alone, with blood money in a stolen shirt pocket, free, like his father once was, to buy Bombay Sapphire, Gucci-Prada-cufflinks-perfume, purple lipstick for a wife who lived in a tin shack, and pink-furred toy camels for children whose faces he'd forgot. He brought them toy metal jewels, a watch made in China, a pox that left a hole in their house.

Bhuvan waits in a far off wing of the vast airport for his flight to arrive. This is his second fear, that somehow, now, of all places and times, he will be stopped before he gets away. The walls of the room expand and contract. For pastime he counts his fingernails over and over again. Still ten, still ten, still ten, but multiplying each time he goes over them. He turns into a

bundle of fingers, a fleshy, quivering lump of fingers in clothes that don't fit, drumming against each other in wait.

He fingers his phone. He will throw it away. Imagine you were me, Phoolan, he thinks, on your first flight ever. You leave coin-sized imprints of your nose and forehead on the oval window next to your seat. The tarmac is mud-streaked because of the monsoon rain, orange and black. All the shapes run into each other and your eyes water as the walls of the plane vibrate as it picks up speed. You swallow and swallow and swallow your spit as the plane wails and groans, it does not want to take off and, just like Mr. Abdilrahman said, the pressure release when the plane finally leaves the earth makes your ears clench tight, and you swallow and swallow like Mr. Abdilrahman advised to make them open again.

You see nothing of your city of crows from the air, the clouds are tight-packed over it. Surely, for a moment, you might believe this is a good thing, like I did. Surely, you have once had dreams, untied from facts. Bhuvan waves a hand before Phoolan, wiping the clouds from the sky. Phoolan, imagine, the sun sets as sky clears beneath you, and the ocean is black. You fall asleep with your head propped against that small window and when next you open your eyes you are falling to the golden-mesh land you will build, that Baadal has built, lying on her back.

Bhuvan blinks tears. Phoolan understood what his father really did. Why didn't she tell him, before he had left? Why didn't Mr. Abdilrahman tell him, what people could hide in the walls. He would never have come, had he known it.

Or would he? Bhuvan feels his size—a small man in a small plane hung over a small city, a city that blossoms like a firework across the land but will never span the sky, is small against the sky. He can see it, only from this plane he can see it. He adjusts his clothes. He thought he'd leave his old self behind when he left Mumbai, but now Baadal holds his other half, and he

wonders what's left. Did this happen to everyone who traveled through the night, did they turn into ghosts of themselves when the sun at last rose?

How many ghosts does a migrant city contain? Mr. Abdilrahman would enjoy that question. Bhuvan looks forward to finding him. He would bring out Bhuvan's ghost, dust its shoulders, hand it back to him. "Of course, you have outgrown this body," he would say to Bhuvan, "but perhaps you will enjoy the memory anyway."

Bhuvan writes to himself, I am sure I do not want such memories, Phoolan. When I return to Mumbai I will eat hot samosas and sticky chutney on the marina, watch the sun set fire to the land that lies west. I will try to find you, but I will not stay. I think it is true, for all that I have built I do not know what home is. I will travel north to where there are mountains and black earth and small patches of sky between the trees where the air is so clean that I can see stars in all of their colors against a rainbow-belted night. I will look up and up and up.

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