A Tale of Remembering and Forgetting

by

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A Tale of Remembering and Forgetting

A Photograph

1998. In college at the University of Chicago, my Urdu professor, C.M. Naim, asks me one day where I am from. For months, I struggle in his class, repeatedly and wrongly conjugating Urdu tenses and invoking his wrath as I despoil the language. But when I reply that my parents were born in Mewat- a cluster of villages outside of Delhi that even those in Delhi do not know about- where they don’t speak “pure” Urdu but a local dialect, he raises his eyebrows. “Interesting. You have a very interesting history. Read about it.”

He compels me towards the Regenstein Library’s 5th floor stacks, one of the only collections in the world that brims with so many obscure books on South Asia. That afternoon I am the only person in the stacks and as I fumble through cloth-bound, hardback texts, an overexposed black and white print photograph in Pratap Aggarwal’s Caste, Power and Religion, stares back at me. In the quiet light of his behemoth library’s book stacks, I find a familiar face.

I know this man.

The college librarian, eyes peering above her reading glasses, interrupts me. It is just the two of us in the fifth floor book stacks. She stands at the far end of the shelves, bellowing, her warning resembling a reprimand: the lights have to be shut off. A folded white paper with the book’s reference code floats like a feather to the ground.

I leave Caste, Religion, and Power, on the shelf, too much to hold for one day, and venture outside, snowflakes dissolving into my black coat, ice crunching beneath the
soles of black boots. How strange these Chicago winters seemed at first; I didn’t even own a winter coat before I moved to this city. How eerie. The wind now howls and cuts past my cheeks. The night is starless, wondrous.

After seeing the photograph, shame crawls over my body, rising from the pore of the skin and remaining on the tips of my arm hair. A shiver that is not part of winter. I am not sure where the shame stems from, only that my life is incongruous. The flitting around. The socializing, the banter. A social world at the University of Chicago constrained to one level of conversation. As I read and read and read, books, texts, and words began to give me meaning that led me deeply elsewhere, like a plunge below the ocean that shows other life-forms below the hinting blue of the surface. But even that is not enough. I was never all that indulgent, never that wild, but indulgent enough to feel a guilt that tugged. But guilt based on what, even I did not know.

The guilt of frivolity, I finally realized. Again, a piece of paper floats to the ground.

The guilt of ignorance.

In *Caste, Religion, Power*, I had encountered my grandfather’s picture. My grandfather is Yasin Khan. He was born in November 1896, at the cusp of a new century in Mewat. Mewat is a geographical area in north India spanning the states of Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. It is distinct because it is home to the Meos, a Muslim tribal group. The Mirasis, North Indian folk storytellers, say that the Goddess Bedmata inscribed unique lines of destiny on Yasin Khan. He died long before I was born. In the years after I encountered that photograph, I would gather stories about him. But at the
time I saw his photograph in the Regenstein Library, I only vaguely knew that he was my grandfather. Over several years, I learn about his role in the 1930s peasant resistance against the hike in agricultural taxes. His fight with the Raja of Alwar. With a sympathetic Britisher, his construction of the first high school in Mewat. His struggles in the Indian Independence Movement and the ways he tried to stop his people from leaving their land and migrating to Pakistan during Partition. How the Yasin Brayne Meo High School that he helped to construct became a home for Partition refugees. The terrible grief at his death that spread through thousands of people in hundreds of villages, widowing all of Mewat. The stories collected in the backdrop of so much change where the village was simultaneously frozen and shattering from seismic social and economic shifts, as Mewat, like the rest of rural India, is left behind and peasants either struggle to survive in the village or move to the cities. I did not know how to make sense of it all, except to gather story after story.

At the University of Chicago, the checkered black and white floors of the Music building connect the Philosophy and Humanities buildings. As I rush from one class to another, I hear a piano playing Chopin. It is a sonata I had also learned to play, soulfully, body leaning into the piano, if never entirely well or completely. As I rush to class, my mind darts through readings in theory. Theories of syncretism, lost histories, postcoloniality, subject and text, observer and observed. These theories coalesce when just a few weeks later in my South Asian Civilizations class, we watch a documentary about agricultural women laborers in northern India. The women look like they could be from my parent’s village; one even resembles my aunt but with a chipped tooth. Villages
which we visited for harried two-week stays every few years and me, keen to photograph each piece of it even then. Dung-caked huts and women in purdah, their long dupattas, practically down to their waist, a long draping of billowing cloth. The men, in turbans, crouching, smoking bidis. At sixteen, I knew that these images all had to be captured, viewed again in the red light of a darkroom on a print that floated in a developing tray. Prints collected in shoe boxes, negatives with frayed edges accumulating.

Now as a college student, I did not know whom to tell about this confrontation with the past. If I could even admit my simultaneous elation and shame. Others I had met hardly had any relatives back in India or if they did, they live in posh residential urban areas, still partial mirrors for their diasporic counterparts. In contrast, many of my relatives resided in villages. Or should I proudly proclaim, I come from a lineage of the oppressed, the enslaved, the rebellious...what I really mean to say is the broken-hearted.

In the auditorium where my South Asian Civilizations class was held, the women on the screen are subjects wrapped in a cellophane of patriarchy, liberalization, and resistance. I do not know what all this means only that something thumps beneath my blue and white blouse. My father had always wanted me to study at Oxford; for Indians, the sign of a true elite education. I had after all grown up playing Chopin, experiencing such intimacy as if the music had been crafted and recorded for me. Now, in class, the very nearest to me are being excavated, displayed, discussed so as not to be forgotten. Only were they ever known? I can see the piano music: stray sheets of five-bar lines filled with dancing black circles coupled with stems, some of the stems possessing leaves, now being wildly strewn across the checkered black and white floors. Slowly, a different music and
language is leading me elsewhere. I feel myself slowly leaving one world and set of
cconcerns to enter deeply into another.

When I return to my parents’ home in Florida, I confront my mother in the
kitchen. My mother is forever in a long, flowery nightgown with a ladle in her hand,
stirring a pot as she gazes at the television screen, usually an Indian soap opera she
watches with fixed intensity, her mouth slightly open in alarm at the events unfolding on
the celluloid.

“I never knew him. You never told me who he was,” I keep insisting. I pace
between the dining room and the kitchen, sometimes picking up a dish or napkin, which I
hold and occasionally dangle, pretending to clean surfaces.

“That is not true. How else would you recognize him?”

I want to say that I always thought you were illiterate, unknowing. I even thought
you were a fool. My brothers and I had called her a simpleton with her stories about the
village, as if the village could be anything more than a place without electricity and
roads. I never believed her stories could rise from the page.

“Flies in the head,” my mother continues. “Dhora pad gaya! This daughter of
mine. When will you be subdued?”

A fly finds its way near my left earlobe. It is whirring like an airplane. Will it
bite or just whisper? It grows louder than my mother’s dismissiveness. Trying to venture
down an ear shaft, and then circling as I wave my head in irritation and blink.

“I have to nap now.” She stirs the pot one last time and puts the wooden spoon
down on a green plastic plate on the counter. “Wake me up with tea.”
My mother naps each afternoon. Sometimes, in these afternoon slumbers in a room of pastel green curtain, she dreams. Dreams that reveal. As when a cousin had run away from home, escaping onto a train, disappearing into a crowd. No one told my mother that had in fact happened and only when she pressed the matter months later did the story spill forth like a broken necklace, words like beads sliding and bouncing on a wooden floor across the room, accompanied by the requisite gasps. I crave such dreams, her gift of knowing. Instead, I fall into a black wash of sleep each night, unsure where all the hours have went.

One afternoon, my mother dreams of my grandfather. My mother refers to him as Bhaiyya which means brother which of course he wasn’t but she and her siblings heard everyone else refer to him as such and that became his designation for years to come. I wake her up with a mug of tea inscribed with “World’s Greatest Mother” in a background of red cartoonish brick, carefully placing it on the nightstand near the table lamp.

“I dreamt of him,” she mumbles. “He was in the room. He patted me on the head and began to speak to me.” She stops. “Only now I cannot remember what he said.”

I frown. “You do not want to remember. Your longing will rise to the surface and you too will have flies in your head.”

In Florida, in the back of our house, there is a dock that overlooks the canal that leads a few meters away into the ocean. The ocean shines. Sometimes, it frowns. Rocks, waves, dips, hurtles. It is easy to watch the ocean and realize that both certainty and uncertainty exist side by side. The certainty that the ocean will still be there. The uncertainty of its form, its mood. I grow up mirroring the ocean in my mutability, like
the stages of a moon that is quarter, half, full. I wait for those nights, partially unexpected, on evening walks through the neighborhood when the moon shines on the ocean, the light shimmering silver on the black water, against a restless wind.
Song of a Nightingale

When we are in primary school, the bus drops my brother, Arshad and I near the Community Centre, a mile and a half from our house in Florida. Once or twice, my mother oversleeps or gets so wrapped up in her cooking that she forgets the time and that we are waiting. I sullenly sit on the curb as elderly men and women go inside for the early bird bingo game. Arshad, thin and awkwardly lanky then, kicks gravel in the parking lot.

“Looks like mom forgot. She’ll realize soon.”

Soon enough her Buick pulls into the parking lot, making a swift turn, both of us sighing in relief. In those moments of waiting, fear of how we get home- with whom- what if an evil stranger came by- flashes through our minds. Often mom brings snacks for us, despite it only being a short car ride, usually cookies and a fruit drink in a square cardboard box. Fears of hunger begin too. What if we are stranded here? Would we starve? In one such incident, Arshad decides that we should walk home.

“Walk home?”

“We can do it. Let’s go.” We put on our backpacks and walk on the street lined with homes, a steady but unthreatening stream of cars passing by. We meet mom along the way near the golf course.

For that lapse, we have leverage on her for days to come. She allows it initially but soon learns that we are milking the incident for far too much.

“Who told you to walk? You don’t know how to use the pay phone in the Community Center?” Arshad realizes she has a point and becomes silent. We never want to concede she has a point.

But one day when mom arrives, she is stone silent. Her eyes brim with tears.
“Your grandmother died. They called me.” She does not say anything more and Arshad and I are stunned, her silent grief is too much for us. When we reach home, we watch her tears fall into the teapot over the stove. Arshad puts his arms around her and pats the back of her head while pools of sadness gather beneath the circles under her fright-filled eyes.

I hardly remember my grandmother’s face, though I was urged to greet her often that one long summer we spent in the kothi, the family home that my grandfather constructed before Partition. Then the electricity went out for hours at a time. Women would gather around us, their fans would flap, come close then square away. A short burst of cold wind, then the air hanging heavily. I envied the grace with which their hands circled and years later I take a fan back with me to Florida and try to replicate the circling wrist motion, even though the central air conditioning didn’t require these gusts of cooling air. That summer I might have run towards my grandmother but admittedly, I now only recall an old woman with missing teeth who slightly frightens me. How the woman beckons me with her arms, come here, and how I, a mere five years old, forever wearing anklets, flee in the opposite direction giving the excuse that I have to rush away to play.

Months later I remember my mother’s grief on that afternoon school ride. I am sitting in her Buick that she has covered with midnight blue towel cloth covers that have accumulated cookie and chip crumbs, and we are driving back from the mall. Our outings consist of wandering through a department store in search of her infamous ‘pant-shirt’ outfits, for in all her thirty plus years as an immigrant she never wears a skirt or
even jeans for that matter, accompanied by a stop-off at Burger King on Highway 19 in our sleepy small retirement town. We do not find her a pant-shirt but instead she buys me a new pair of jeans. My mother has this terrible habit of patting me on the backside in public places and I squeal for her to stop embarrassing me and she just replies no, no, you are my daughter. This is her love, without borders or rationale or self-control and over the years, I learn that the form of her love would never change. Her children would always be children, nestled close to her breast, for the best days of her life were when we were young, mirroring when she was young and close to her mother. As I marvel at my find, and protect the two gallons of milk we had picked up from the grocery store in the backseat of the Buick, an old Hindi film song comes on. The sweet aching nostalgia of Lata Mangeshkar, dubbed India’s nightingale, and Mohammed Rafi. The song fills me with my mother’s sadness and suddenly, inexplicably in the backseat of her car, I cannot stop wiping away the tears, the sobs too muffled even for her to hear. The nightingale tugs and rips away at something in that afternoon sun. She never sees those tears and I never tell anyone else about that afternoon.
On Cows

I would have been a cow; my mother answers
do cows speak and think of one another, of us,

they must
but they move only when slapped by the palm of a hand
derisive click of the tongue, ‘huth,’
when the street throbs with Maruti cars,

scooters, dry air
it is as if they were all alone,
in a field, eating grass,
they might as well be staring at the sky,
the moon hanging from its lip
you can’t understand,

and she tells me some days later
about the cow she was gifted once,

such big, pretty eyes
her own eyes grow larger as she says this,

she comes into my bedroom years later
to ask if both her eyes are the same shape

yes, of course, leave me alone,
you are so strange

*No, one is slightly larger than the other*
ten years later, I would look in the mirror

and realize the same thing about my own eyes

*God denied us symmetry at birth*

but no, it was the beauty of jagged shapes
2000. An airplane descends. I feel the thrill of the wheels skid against the ground. Stewardesses in red saris smile in relief. The airport is empty because it is the middle of the night, the terrific silence of four a.m. anywhere in the world when only the defiant, the troubled, the ones in transit waiting to land on the next patch of soil are awake.

My mother waits for her nephew to squeeze his way into Customs to find us, in defiance of proper rules, an exercise of political clout that she unabashedly enjoys. He will greet us with garlands of two-toned marigolds. Cousins, nephews, her brother buzz around us, grabbing suitcases and handbags, stuffing them with startling quickness and efficiency into the back of jeeps. My mother hands me the bouquet of roses in her hands; I have never held such a large bouquet.

Cars honk mercilessly, pushing their way through the cacophony of traffic. We reach the kothi, the family house that Yasin Khan constructed before Partition. The alley is so narrow that the car struggles. The driver slaps a cow on the backside, ‘huth’, and honks furiously for rickshaws to clear the path.

This is my first stay in India as an adult and I have just graduated from college. My disclosed reason for coming to India is a human rights fellowship. I’ve spent the last year at the University of Chicago organizing an activist group which holds teach-ins and engages in elaborate email debates over politics in South Asia and its Diaspora, leading to personal rifts. Still, I feel endless possibilities as our ideas lay claim across two continents. My undisclosed reason, a motivation I cannot verbalize, for coming to India,
is that when I close my eyes tightly, I see a map of India in all red. When I open my eyes, I have to follow this red.

The kothi has five levels, but the family only resides on the fourth. The remaining three levels include shops, a sweets store, a tailoring shop, fabric and clothing and shoe stores. The fifth level is the roof that overlooks the city of Gurgaon, which was a village when my mother grew up there (Gur meaning sugar and gaon meaning village itself). Now Gurgaon is a city. The kothi is in the old part of the city, congested, confused and bursting with disorderly life. Each visit the kothi itself transforms only slightly, the calming reassurance of a house that everyone in this large sprawling family can visit and be assured that they will be given tea and fed a meal.

From the rooftop, just a few hundred feet away, I can see the mosque that Yasin Khan and the Meos built in the night. For Yasin Khan so many surreptitious activities took place in the night; the mosque was a contentious piece of architecture in colonial India as Hindu-Muslim conflicts heightened. In the weeks and years to come, I spend hours going up and down those stairs, a hypnotic ascent. I stare from the balcony onto the market below, pacing the roof and surveying the multi-level stores and residences of old Gurgaon.

In the kothi, gender norms can be ambiguous. Sometimes, a space, such as the living room, feels as if it’s marked for the men gathered as women must be invited to sit on the couch or enter only to serve food; other times, even a bedroom can have disparate family members sitting together on a single bed engaged in a family argument. It is best to stand on the balcony, to seek respite from the flow of human traffic in the kothi, when
the sun sets and the day comes to a close and the sky dims and yet the vegetable market below throbs, ebbs. One evening, my aunt, whose foot has been injured for some days, limps up beside me and balances against the railing. She hardly speaks to me but today she begins, “This house was once torn down then rebuilt. The mosque was once painted green before it was pink. The streets were once empty before they became full and the entire public came here to buy their vegetables and fruits.”

I nod. In this place of unlikely alliances, could not the banyan tree, symbolic of Indian civilization, and the mosque, a newcomer of the 12th century and finding particular expression in 1945 through Yasin Khan, have spoken to one another?
A Conversation between a Mosque and a Banyan Tree

Outside the kothi, a banyan tree with hundreds of coiling branches sits in the center of a small park facing a pink mosque.

“I am about 1,000 years old,” the Banyan tree estimates for the mosque.

“I am twenty days old,” the mosque replies. The mosque can barely stretch a finger. There is a large rectangular pool in the middle of the mosque’s body. At night, the moon reflects off this water and dances against the sky. People come to sit next to this pool and admire its reflection.

“Yasin Khan gave you birth,” the banyan tree says. “I saw it all before my eyes.”

There is a short wind and the leaves in its branches shake.

“Allah gave me birth,” the mosque replies.

“Regardless, you are beautiful.” The banyan tree is not interested in polemics. But will you last the banyan tree wonders then sighs. Will any of us last for very long?

“I am cement and paint. Can these things make you beautiful?”

“I’ve seen it all. So much comes. Each new wrinkle gives birth to another finger, another palm, a few more wrinkles.”

“But that is why you are magnificent,” the mosque finally admits.

“I age and grow more and more plentiful. More and more fingers each year. Not like people…”

“I do not know how long I will live.”

“You needn't worry. Even if you break, crumble, and fall to pieces you lived once in mint green and pink with a body of water in your center. For now, you have me as company.”
Together we can talk about births, deaths. Growth, stillness. Sadness, foolishness. Rage and those small slivers of ecstasy that rise up from time to time. That lives before they are washed away with the rain.
Lands

my
mother
was
my first country.
the first place I ever lived.
-lands

from “salt” by nayirrah waheed

My mother stays awake late into the night. A circle of women gather under a fluorescent light. We are staying in my niece’s bedroom and Bollywood posters line every wall and movie stars stare back at us. My mother’s arrival is an excuse for relatives once, twice, thrice removed to convene at the kothi and talk hours into the night. Long held disputes are mulled over and new ones are made. Relatives come in and out of rooms, stage protests, and develop side conversations and alliances in the hallways over shaky marriages, marital prospects, and land disputes. A female cousin, accused of being too sensitive, disappears to the roof, insulted. The women cajole her to come back downstairs. The gossip and the family dramas are endless, tiring, fascinating.

“I’ve heard that people,” an aged woman wearing crooked blue glasses begins, “don’t die in America.”

“People die in America,” my mother insists. My mother has left behind her flowery Florida nightgowns and pant-shirts for an array of shalwar kamizes and a loosely draped thin scarf on her head at all times. She is radiant; I call her the Elizabeth Taylor of Mewat. She speaks fluently in Mewati, as if she never left.

“Then bahan-sister,” the woman continues, “what are you doing there? If you have to die, just like the rest of us, then you might as well die amongst us!”
The room laughs, even me, lying on my side in bed, frowning at the cupboard, wanting to sleep at this late hour. We laugh at the truth, and the innocence, and the ignorance of this statement. For some, such as this woman, there could never be a reason to uproot, except the promise of immortality.
While we stay in Gurgaon, we travel to the interior of Mewat, a drive down a single, solid path, Sohna Road, with overhanging sheltering eucalyptus trees, that cuts into dirt paths. Sohna Road is the tree trunk and the dirt roads are its branches. On this road trip, we visit one house after another. Sometimes, there is a phone call to plan these visits. If my parents are there, then surely a chicken has to be slaughtered; a feast planned. But often, the visits are impromptu. Somehow, a conversation from a few years back is easily resumed. Time bears weight and thickness in the village.

Despite how many visits I make to Meo villages, the scenes are still always a bit unfamiliar, awakening, as if I am seeing these places again new with the same curiosity. Meo women, my cousins, walk with a gait. Their hips sway even as their words bite. Mewat may lag behind in female education, both deeply embedded in a patriarchal society and lacking the necessary infrastructure, and yet the women are vocal and expressive, hearts laid on their sleeves, as they coo and yell, metaphors wrapped inside their language. *You are as dumb as the brother of wheat, naaj ka bhai.* No filter.

Strange men and women pat my head gently with rough, weathered hands. Over the years, I learn some names. When my relatives say hello, *salaam,* it is said like this: the younger person walks towards the elder person, bows the head slightly and waits for the elder relative to run a hand over the head. Sometimes, relatives will cup the cheek or run hands over your eyes, as if they have been waiting all this time to see your face. When two peers meet, as when I greet my female cousins, we say hello by grabbing hands, more than a handshake, less than an embrace. We speak with hands, a hello where you smell the other person, long remember the texture of skin after their hand has left yours.
Stay

“How long is she planning to stay?” my uncle, Mamu Tayyab, asks during this first stay after college. Mamu Tayyab is a heavyset man whose eyes shine. When he enters the room, he expects to be noticed, for there to be movement, for people to scurry away, or to hurry towards him in greeting and supplication. When he smiles, he expects you to smile with him. When he yells or barks, you had better be as quiet as a wooden object or quickly disappear in an opposite direction.

Now Mamu Tayyab is the leader of the Meos and a major political figure in the state of Haryana. After Yasin Khan’s death, he is crowned with the turban and marked as chieftain of the Meos at the pagdhi bandhana ceremony. He is not only gifted land, jewelry, and flowers but gold and even an elephant. The Mirasis construct this quatrain about the ceremony-

So many people were invited
the children of Ram and Krishna
Even if you gathered all the people from China
It would still not be equivalent.

While he is charmed that I am here, his eyes say, the daughters of this house do not roam. He cannot think of a worse idea than my extended stay.

“She wants to stay for six months. Don’t you?” my mother asks, possibly prodding my uncle's disapproval in the hopes that I will decide to forego the fellowship. “She is a flying kite.”

“Why? What will she do here? She should go around with you, do her shopping and then return. What will she do working at an NGO?” Before Mamu Tayyab, it is difficult to actually disagree openly; silent refusal is the best one can do. He is the uncle
after all who houses us each time we visit, ensuring no want is left unattended. Once I complained about the lack of ventilation in the bathroom, leading to a build-up of sweat in summer months; in the midst of other responsibilities, he ordered electricians to install a bathroom ceiling fan the next day.

Mamu Tayyab remains quiet then and decides to get up from his chair. In the months of what becomes years of ongoing travel, six months here, a year there, until I finally move to India for three years to do human rights work and teach, Mamu Tayyab sees that I am fine, without scars or other signs of damage. Or rather that the scars that come through travails of living in a place simultaneously familiar and foreign are ones of my own choosing. But then, in the weeks ahead I stay icily silent in front of Mamu Tayyab, believing him to my nemesis, my ultimate enemy. He too refuses to address me directly but can feel the sheet of white silence that is there between us.

Over the years and before his death, we reconcile twice. Once, we speak briefly about Shail Mayaram, the anthropologist in Delhi who interviews him and writes a recent book about Meos, *Resisting Regimes*, which becomes a treatise for me to study in the years ahead. Shail also spent a semester at University of Chicago when I was there; I would meet her only in Delhi. When I am at the *kothi*, relatives reprimand me when I try to read a book; to be with others is to converse with them, even if it means sometimes sitting silently and awkwardly together. Information is passed orally, through sound and gesture. Only Mamu Tayyab makes a point to go to the bookstore, bring back Shail’s book, and offers it to me in a brown paper bag. He is proud of himself for finding this book, a gift that conveys recognition. “She has written a lot,” he says. “She has done a lot of research.”
I am surprised by this gesture. I thank him.

The second time is on the night of Yasin Khan’s urs, the Sufi ceremony marking his death. An urs is celebrated with recited couplets and song because it marks not only death but the wedding of that individual with God. Earlier that week, Mamu Tayyab and I erupted into as close an argument as we would ever have at the dinner table; a cousin kicks me under my chair for speaking too much mind.

“Isn’t it time to settle down?” he insists. Settling down means not coming to India for such long periods or working with NGO’s or living separately in Delhi. My relatives may not have known what to make of my arrival but when they ask me, “Man lag raha hain?” which literally means “Is your heart here?” and more generally, “Are you at home here?” I say nod yes, say yes with shining eyes.

Here my father had reinvented himself entirely in America, part of the wave of professional immigrants in the late 60s greeted upon arrival with open arms after struggling to find jobs in India.

Here I am, fascinated by everything he left.

At the urs, I am determined not to speak to Mamu Tayyab for constructively evicting me from Mewat because his disapproval is known to everyone in my family. Only he stands next to me, outside of the Yasin Brayne Meo High School, puts his arms around my waist and pulls me close to his large protruding belly. We’ve never actually embraced; I’ve only ever felt his hand grace my head. He whispers, “Aathe rehna. Keep coming.” My anger, a hot rod, fizzles.

Stay.
A Changing Gurgaon

In the years to come, with a deluge of foreign capital, Gurgaon will change at a dizzying rate with new five-level malls, multiplexes, call centers, eateries, high rises, corporate headquarters, factories. With its sheen new structures and labor unrest, some will call it the next Dubai. Some farmers will become overnight millionaires through real-estate speculation. Family will stay at the kothi but many will complain about its location in the old part of Gurgaon, making it less the literal center of Yasin Khan’s household. My younger cousins, nieces and nephews will eagerly ask if I am impressed with the new golf course; if they have malls like this in America. I overcome shame by going deep into my history, as if the weight of history lies on my shoulders themselves. A shame that comes from listening to others disparage this place, ignorant of all the hues and reflections of this complex land, or who can only cast pity on this forgotten territory that still offers me a trailing sense of home. My younger relatives overcome shame through openness to a rapidly changing India, leaving behind the past, a glance behind the shoulder. In our cultural universes, I will be less distant from my younger cousins. Yet some part of me will remember earlier days when we struggled to speak to one another, piecing together awkward bits of English, Urdu and Mewati, as if we are finding ways to tumble towards one another. I enjoyed our mismatch of worlds. The interior of Mewat, however, will largely remain the same. My relatives will, in pieces, move out and undertake complex commutes to raise their children outside of it. I wait to see the rest of Mewat explode into another landscape entirely.
Wali-ji, Friend of God

I slipped onto a tiger. I stroked and petted its fur. The tiger carried me upwards when my calves began to pierce. They saw me from afar, down below. Their eyes peering upwards, looking curiously.

I could hear their voices. I wanted to lose these voices. Each word paining me, diving deep into the skin. The calls and echoes empty. Like a thorn, I pull the words out. Are they really necessary?

I ride further away from them. I can speak to the bird that dazzles between the trees. The bird and I can look at one another, the speaking of eyes. The dropping of fear. Fear that just falls heavy and melts gracefully into the mountain. It makes a river of gravel and dust and fallen, black leaves.

I walk, even in the bitter cold wind. Sometimes, days at a time. Only a shawl wrapped around.

Again, the fear around my ankles.

I can tell from the way that the blue hangs in the closing of the sun that change is somewhere nearby. Like burnt wood that can be smelled. Or rabbit droppings. And that is why it is necessary to hold it, with the tiger between my legs.

Dried leaves crunching in my mouth, caught in the gaps of the teeth, but still an easy swallow.

They may not understand these disappearances, the peering eyes below. Confused, not lucid like the eyes of the tiger between my legs. They do not know how these silences, this barrenness, the slow detection of the small, seismic rumblings will feed us all.

We cannot be afraid to lose.

And like this, the days pass, the clothes grow soiled, the hair in small, rough ringlets, finally unruly.
Hindu or Muslim, Both or Neither

“Your history gets in the way of my memory… 
My memory keeps getting in the way of your history.”

-from “Farewell” by Agha Shahid Ali in The Country Without a Post Office

Once, as a child, after a twenty plus hour flight from Florida, I arrive in Gurgaon and that morning, my mother and I make a trip to a small village in Mewat to sit at the grave site of a shrine. We enter the room in a moment of ecstatic song. My mother and I are seated close to the grave, a few meters away from musicians who sing qawwalis. Years later, I learn that we went to the grave of wali-ji. The literal meaning of wali-ji is Friend of God, but refers to my great grand uncle, an actual human being who raised Yasin Khan after his own father abruptly died chasing his buffalo into a pond. For his spiritual powers, including long meditative wanderings in the Aravalli Mountains, wali-ji was deemed a saint. His shrine lies in a largely desolate village with only occasional visitors.

Once, as a college student, I wash the living room silver with my mother in the kitchen. It is a Sunday morning ritual where we polish each piece of silverware so that it evolves from a smudged black to gleaming silver. We ignore the Florida sun and palm trees and stay inside. She and my father argue about their castes, Daimroth and Dhaingal.

“Dhaingals are superior,” my mother insists.

My father just shakes his head at this claim of superiority.

I ask them how they can have a caste when they are Muslim and they just reply that they do.

Then, I learn that Meos have a background both of Islamic Sufism, hence the visit to the shrine, and indigenous Hinduism, hence Meos’ caste. My father’s caste claims to
be descendants of the avatar-god Krishna. The great epic battle of the *Mahabharata* is after all, fought partially in Gurgaon itself. My mother’s caste, Dhaingals, claim to be descendants of the god-avatar Rama.

Do you know, I say to them, as faucet water spurs onto a silver teacup during another round of Sunday morning silver washing, that your allegiance to caste is derived from Hinduism.

It is possible, they answer.

Next, I learn that some relatives don’t subscribe to Islamic Sufism and won’t visit the grave of wali-ji. By now, there are strains of conservative Islamic movements that find song and mixed theologies a desecration of faith. I am horrified at this denial of song.

But the British confused it all. They could not grasp a community that was indigenous Hindu but that in the thirteenth century slowly converted to Islam through a Sufi saint, Moinuddin Chishti, who preached, *love for all*. Meos swallowed pieces of this new religion like an unknown fruit.

Leaders decided that India would be a Hindu state and Pakistan would be a Muslim state because in this new nation of clear divisions, one had to make a decisive choice about faith. Yasin Khan however, urged Meos to stay in India so that they would not lose their land and Meos officially declared themselves Muslims.

Today, Meos are still Muslims, though once Hindu-Muslim tribal-agricultural. Today, Meos are a minority of the Indian state, falling into the category of Other Backward Classes, a collective term used by the Government of India for socially and educationally disadvantaged sectors of the population.
Today, I decide that I am a descendant of divinity. Literally, because Wali-ji is a follower of the Sufi Chistiyya order. Spiritually, because Krishna and Rama probably did pass through Mewat and spawn a bloodline. A skeptical scholar, a close friend actually, says this claim to the Hindu gods is an example of an oppressed group laying claim to a history to rehabilitate the cultural self; I decide that he is merely jealous of my origins.

I meet Shail Mayaram, the author of *Resisting Regimes*, for the first time at a small lecture-workshop held by Ramachandra, “Ramu” Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi at the Habitat Center in New Delhi. During the tea break, I sit on the steps outside, a perfect Delhi afternoon where the lawns are lush green and a range of flowers bloom. Next to me is a female professor who teaches at the University of Florida. We converse. The irony, I think, of meeting another Indian Floridian in Delhi. Only another woman, Shail herself, crouches down next to me and introduces herself. This gesture alone endears me to her for years to come.

“I have read your book,” I blurt out. I have read it but there is so much material it, her words dense and colliding into one another, that I only have vague intimations of where it will lead me. I explain who I am.

She raises her eyebrows. “I am glad people are still reading my book and it is relevant.” Then she says to the University of Florida professor, “She is a descendant of the Chistiyya lineage.” For Shail, I am a cultural artifact in the flesh. Shail is the scholar who will teach me how to read Mewat.

Over the years, Ramu Gandhi gives lectures on religion and philosophy. Post-Partition politics in India have had rippling effects as various right-wing factions arise to
represent both Hindus and Muslims. There are increasing incidents of Islamophobia in India as Muslims are associated with terrorism and social and economic backwardness. Right-wing Hindu groups, like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and particularly its faction the Rastriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS), suspect the loyalty of Indian Muslims to the nation and imply that they should go to Pakistan and join their brethren.

One afternoon, Ramu Gandhi looks at me and says, “Did not Islam find its singing voice in South Asia?”

Yes, I think, yes.

What I do not know at that moment is that Ramu Gandhi’s grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi, knew Yasin Khan. That Gandhi came to Mewat and urged Meos not to leave India during Partition because Meos are “the spine of this nation.” Ramu Gandhi continues to lecture on the Indian epic, The Ramayana, the Indian epic and quest of the god Rama to rescue his wife Sita from the demon Ravana. Ramu Gandhi explicitly wonders about the goddess Sita’s exile to the forest after Ram suspects her of infidelity when she is abducted by Ravana. Was it not wrong for Ram to suspect her chastity, her fidelity? He should not have made her walk through the fire to prove her purity.

Yes, yes.

But was not Sita during her exile dancing in the forest?

I pause. I have never heard this interpretation from Indian feminists. Maybe.

Even in the face of exile, he continues, in the face of a wrong, she was not only anguished. She was also a maker of music.
Did Islam not find its singing voice in India? Ramu Gandhi does not repeat this phrase but I do to myself. The Mirasis, the musicians at wali-ji’s shrine, the poetry of the mosque are all a piece, a sliver of this voice. They all belong.

Yes, yes, yes, yes.

and

yes, yes, yes

and

yes.
Verse

A kalimah was read. One verse, then two. The past is not erased because it is not a garment to be worn then shorn. It is in the tendrils of hair. The ruh. The soul.

A temple is mounted on top of the shrine. A devi or goddess alongside a turquoise mosque.

The snake that coils and looks you in the eye so you bow to it.

You bend. A sajda. Head to velvet or straw mat.

I offer myself in prayer.
Close to the Land

2012. My father’s brother, Uncle Mehmood, only a few years younger, has always felt differently about Mewat, and therefore India. But he is of a different mould entirely, evident when he broke off his engagement during graduate school to marry my aunt after he watched Raj Kapoor’s film *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram*. In that classic, a lovely and half-clad Zeenat Aman suffers a partial deformity that is only evident on one side of her face that she always conceals with either a lock of hair or her scarf. When her lover, whom she meets in the mountain at night, marries her, he still has not learned that her face is half-perfect, half-ruined. When her lover-husband learns this truth, he initially rejects her but emerges a changed man as he accepts her unconventional beauty. My aunt bears a reddish birthmark that covers one side of her face. Sometimes she tried to diminish it with powder but it is still visibly noticeable. Unlike my mother, my aunt did not grow up in Mewat, travelling the country with her father who served in the Army and studying Russian literature in college where she hung out with Delhi leftists and served on the leadership of the student chapter of the Communist Party of India-Marxist. My uncle chose a woman of Mewat unusual in mind, a partial outsider, scarred, yet still lovely, in appearance and spirit. In contrast, my mother received no more than an 8th grade education, earning her GEDs in the US. She would escape to the bathroom where I followed her to study. Yasin Khan had seen my father, a genius boy from a small village studying at the Yasin Brayne Meo High School, and decided that he would marry my mother. Yet my mother, the most charmed daughter of Yasin Khan, lucky enough to never feel anything other than the fact that she is inherently special, a trait and an
insistence that followed her wherever she went in the world has always learned how to get her way. I bear traces of both women.

When Uncle Mehmood retires from his position as senior management at Unilever in London, he moves to India and builds a farmhouse in Mewat on ancestral land, staying there every few weeks. After years of corporate life, he revives his passion for agricultural farming and starts a dairy with 76 cows and buffaloes to produce unadulterated milk, a rarity for the area where commercial milk is often mixed with soap to increase its quantity, despite the fact that doing so might lead to illness. At the farmhouse, there is a nearby garden with tomatoes and eggplants and small purple clustered flowers. When I visit my uncle in the farmhouse, we spend three days overseeing the farm and visiting relatives. At night, there is only intermittent electricity, the night sky studded with stars, small bits of silver in an absolutely quiet stretch of black. There is the occasional dog barking and the sound of the muezzin from twelve different villages, each voice resounding one after another. He shares Meo history because he loves to talk and of all the places he has lived- London, Amsterdam, Singapore- Mewat is still his favorite. Here I am born in Miami, growing up on the banks of converted Florida swampland in a three-story house near a canal that spills into the Gulf of Mexico and yet this place of open fields, bare rooms, shrouded people and distant mountains still feels familiar. Somehow, it is still mine.
The Train

1.

My mother’s sister died last week. My mother says, she was not old or sick. But I knew that she was. I had seen her brittle bones, fading memory, displaced thoughts. She thought I was my mother. Still, I know it is like this. Each person fades, to be laid below the earth.

And when my mother cries, it is as if her heart is being physically ripped out. Last year there were three deaths. Her older brother, followed by his wife two months later, and in between the younger brother. The village is dying. I make a hospital visit to see my uncle on a bed, a hydrangea of plastic tubes.

For once, I am in the right place at the right time because he dies soon after we leave the hospital. I mourn his death as if he was my brother with a house full of Meo women,

reciting prayers on beads, beads falling into bowls as if he is being lowered into the earth with the utterance of each word. The village is dying. I do not bother

with the two funerals that follow. Instead, I fall in love. I am tired of death and decide that life must triumph.

With each death, a piece of my mother is being taken out. And when she sobs, it is the horrible cry of a child, as if memory is being shattered, a wrongful taking away.

2.

In that same week our neighbor’s mother died. They held a gathering in the temple that they called a celebration to speak of this woman who lived eighty-plus years. Everyone recalled her laugh, her penchant for reading, her fondness for gatherings, the tennis sneakers

she wore underneath her sari as she took an evening walk. A woman sang for her. And her own daughter
relayed a dream from the night before,
her mother wearing her favorite blazing red sari

and boarding a train. *I worried she would not find the right compartment.*
But I’ll find it, she told her. And the train departs.
That night I tell my mother you too must celebrate. Death is not just death.
If others leave, it is not your loss alone. They too have to be elsewhere.
An American Meo

For centuries Meos endured a succession of regimes from Arab and Turkish rule, to the Mughal empire and Rajput kingdoms, culminating in British colonialism and the eventual bloody Partition of India and Pakistan. For eight centuries, Meos resisted state authorities. In 2012, I travel to Uzbekistan on a tour with my parents and stand in the government museum in Tashkent, staring at paintings of rulers who invaded Mewat.

“There is Babar,” I tell my mother. “He stole a lot of Meo land.” Only Babar, with his deep-set eyes, captures my mother’s attention. She stares and blinks as if she is flirting with his picture.

“He is very handsome,” she says. “Take my picture with him.”

I relent; so what if he is of the line of our ancestors’ oppressors? The same goes for a statue of Tamerlane, or Timur the Lame, because he was actually disabled but history erases these details. He too burned plains of Mewat. His sculpture has him valiantly on a horse in mid-air in the center of Tashkent. Again, we take more pictures.

When a tribe splits, splinters, everyone in the tribe suffers the effects. As I feel myself moving back to the US on a permanent basis, no longer drastically cutting up time and geography, I set my email to receive Google Alerts about Mewat. In just a month, all of the articles are about Meo gangs, or children dying of malaria, or the lack of government doctors in rural clinics, or a scam involving stolen funds for children’s schoolbooks and rations. Is there an American parallel? A fellow-writer in workshop pens a red-ink comment at the end of my story about Partition in Mewat: “Meos are the real Indians.”
In 2013, I travel out West. In South Dakota, I discover Crazy Horse, a Lakota warrior killed by surprise in battle against the ‘new’ Americans and the Ziolkowski family that devote their lives and funds to erect a memorial, a rock sculpture akin to Mount Rushmore, that consists of Crazy Horse charging in battle, depicted as half-man and half-horse. The family’s mission, they say on their website, is to create a record because history has repeatedly submerged its minorities.

Over lunch, my father and I argue about the history of the Native Americans and I say, don’t you see, the history of the Meos is not so different. In its specificity, yes, but as a part of a tidal wave of powerful conquerors usurping the land of indigenous populations and leading to their systemic erasure and poverty in the present-day, no. My father and I can never agree about structural inequality; he, after all, made it out.

I want to say, you cannot be ordinary, even as you try.

Only he says, as he eats a taco salad, maybe you are right.

In the nearly fifty years since my father graduated from India’s top medical school, AIIMs, not a single other Meo has gained admission to AIIMs. He thrived and sees himself as nothing special, even though he and my mother are the first immigrants from Mewat to the US.

You are a fluke, I say, like a falling star or a rare lunar eclipse. Like Yasin Khan, the Goddess Bedmata inscribed unique lines of destiny on your forehead, too.

As I gaze at Crazy Horse from a distance through the glass of the lunchroom, uninterested in my own taco salad, I consider the thousands of disappearing indigenous
tribes in the world. With histories of dust and sand, no markers for the dead, I cannot help but admire this half-man-half-horse, as he charges in battle and fury.

After I move back to the US, I am given advice to think of home not as a geographical place but in my writing itself. When my mother and I often visited Mewat, unknown Meo women would ask if she had been to her father’s village. When I began to visit Mewat on my own, sometimes, I inherited this question. Attending pilgrimage sites and weddings and funerals without my parents, I tried, awkwardly and imperfectly, to maintain the link, the memory. I complained and yet I also delighted in the imposition. In the US, at first, there is the unbearable resounding silent void of people and places that can no longer be seen or touched or heard. *How will I ever get used to their absence?*

During the summer of 2015, I venture to East Harlem for a talk on memoir and family history at La Casa Azul Bookstore. The cab driver on 116th and Lexington asks me where I am from.

I ask him why it matters.

He decides that I could be from anywhere.

I laugh.

I often feel like I am from everywhere and nowhere and somewhere very, very small all at once.

I ask him again for directions.

He knows that I am headed to the bookstore.

I ask him how he knows.
He says because they sell good books and I look like I read books. And it is as if he knows that now it is here, in these pages, writing and reading and remembering and reconstructing, where I might just ultimately reside.

*   *   *

*   *   *

*   *   *
Kala Pani and Other Stories
2013. At the Government of India archives in New Delhi, my first attempt at historical research, 82 years after the actual peasant uprising, I find my grandfather’s name, Yasin Khan, in colonial papers. Read. Pause. Record. Scream within. Distinct, his name pops forth from a yellowed page and confirms the stories about him might just be true. How did he do what he did? He is accused of being a rabble-rouser, a leader, a divider, a traitor. What he really wanted was a decrease, a lowering, and a fair appropriation of the Prince of Alwar’s tax. He aimed to close the divide. He aimed to quell existing dissent. And I want to know precisely how when I do not know much or hardly anything about taxes or guns or the colonial period of the 1930’s northern India.
only no one can tell me the details of how

but how?

how how how

how how how how how how

how how how how how how how how
The Times of India,

December 1932

Map of Alwar showing villages
affected by the Meo rebellion
Three months in the archives teach me that the British government preserved many documents but the British government also misplaced, failed to preserve, possibly and probably destroyed many documents related to the armed struggle of 90,000 peasants against the Indian Prince of Alwar in Mewat. The documents-- official and unofficial correspondences, reports, newspaper articles- that do exist are delicious. Each time I uncover new information, my heart leaps.
“of any violent demonstration, taking place…

Police, Gurgaon is in Ferozpur Jhirka and is in touch with the chaudris of the leading pals…He has taken steps to move extra police to Ferozpur as a precautionary measure and the suggestion of and is arranging to meet the Inspector General of Police, in the near future to discuss the situation with him…saw Ch. Mohd. Yasin Khan M.L.C. yesterday…that there is no movement amongst the Meos and that his cooperation can always…”
During my breaks, I wander the flowered lawns of the National Archives and its corridors.

On the walls, there are old photographs of the princes.

I find the Prince of Alwar, Raja Jai Singh, in those photographs.

He appears handsome, regal, arrogant.
My name, misspelled, is now in the archives too.

In some instances, I am the first person after 23 years to flip through these pages.

In other cases, it is only 13 years and I am in the company of the anthropologists and historians who led me to this place.
Only the newspaper-archive archives are incomplete. The archive stops and starts in unexpected places, burned edges.

To find more petals of this story, I invite Mirasis, genealogical storytellers, to the kothi. *Tell me a story about Yasin Khan.*

Improve your Mewati, they say.

I find Meo folksingers on the college campus of Jawarhalal Nehru University. *Sing me a story about Yasin Khan. Sing me a story about the Aravalli Hills.*
I met my grandfather, Yasin Khan, in family albums.

He died 9 years before I was born but 28 days after he gave my sister her name.

Her name means daughter of the moon.
I met him again as a college student in the University of Chicago 5th floor book stacks.

His picture stared back at me from the initial pages of Pratap Aggarwal’s *Caste, Religion, and Power*.

I left *Caste, Religion and Power* in the book stacks and ventured outside, snowflakes dissolving everywhere. The night starless, wondrous.


I read and write this story.
Pagdhi Bandhana Ceremony (crowning of the turban)

So many people were invited
the children of Ram and Krishna
Even if you gathered all the people from China
It would still not be equivalent.

-Mirasi verse
I.

"Raja su Rani Kahe Tu Rehna Ko Jayo
Hun Mile Aasin Tu Wake Paman Pad Jaye

The Queen asks the King to go to Rehna,
Grab hold,
Bow your head near Yasin's feet..."

-Mirasi couplet from the folk epic, Chaudhari Yasin ki Baat

_A Few Men Gather_

1932. A few Meo men gather around a courtyard because in winter it is too cold to move. All that can be done is to sit close to the fire and throw wood, newspapers, and coal and watch as these items smolder and disappear into one another through a large, billowing orange flame. Embers crackle.

The men launch the conversation of the hour. Wasn’t the Raja or Prince of Alwar incensed when Yasin Khan, a leader of the Meos arrived in the Capital and the British Government also gave him a seat at the table of the Chamber of Princes? Did not the Raja claim that the Meos are a mere peasant tribe and he, the Raja, a great leader, an upper caste? How dare Yasin Khan! One man stands up and imitates the Raja’s haughty walk, while the rest laugh in unison, slapping their thighs. Their wrinkled brown hands clapping the folds of yellowing cloth.

The men grew up hearing about the Raja whose picture sometimes appears in the newspaper and reveals a handsome man who is covered with jewels, triple string pearl necklaces and studded ruby earrings. Gold jewels even line his velvet turban worth a lakh and a half. The Raja, who claims to be direct descendant of the Sun, a living avatar
woken each morning by his servant who sings him a hymn, has amassed a fortune in the palace through exorbitant taxes, while the Meo peasants struggle, awaiting rains, suffering both droughts and floods. The Raja too has grown more vile and ostentatious over time, staging animal fights in the amphitheater to watch creatures of every kind shred one another, bits of flesh and trails of blood dotting the grounds. A rumor circulates that he even set his own horse on fire when it did not perform well.

He lets wild pigs trample fields of crops--wheat, barley, spinach--because hunting game, a rifle sitting astride the Raja’s hip for a mid-afternoon outing, is his private past-time. He is making us Meos the trespassers!

Yet look too at all else the Raja has done, one of the men feels compelled to insert, the roads he has built, the telephone lines that run across villages, the multitude of glorious palaces--Vijay Mandir, Itarana, Moti Dungri, Jai Vilas--all praising the name of the city of Alwar, carrying forth the tradition of the great Rajput kingdoms, a responsibility the Raja was bestowed at birth.

When the Raja is taxing the Meo peasants four times more than the tax in British-controlled areas, however, taxing every moving thing-sheep, goats, camels, yes camels, horses, donkeys, cows, buffaloes, even elephants-how can his opulent palaces even be admired? The tax, a heavy, burdensome thing, hangs like a cloud. The tax dulls like an ache that might burst or dig deeper into the bones. The tax must be resolved, confronted now. Nothing else is worthy of discussion or fretting over.

Their hookahs gurgling, the men spend hours reflecting on the Raja before one of them bellows upstairs to the women, locked in their own heated conversation, inquiring after their evening *rotis*. The women quickly begin kneading dough, tossing slabs against
tin dishes and elongating circular pieces to throw onto the flame of the chulha. These men and this conversation are just a part of the reddish ferment that is rising. So when Yasin Khan and other like-minded leaders begin to consider ways to oppose the tax, discontent easily spreads through the villages of Mewat.

_The Tax Collector Comes to the Village or the Events at Dhamukar_

For days at a time, the rains can refuse to descend and the villagers dip their heads back searching the morose gray sky. Some even stick out their tongues in the hope that a glint of water will grace their tongues. Other times, the drastic onset of rain floods the area entirely. In winter, frost can spread over the crops, causing them to wilt or fail to sprout entirely. It is a delicate balance, the crops and the weather in these villages, some patches abundantly leafy and others a terrain of dust and sand. All listen to the cry of a foreboding jackal, a call of escalating octaves as the creature nestled in the Aravalli mountains dips its head back too and screams into the sky.

Months after the men sat in the courtyard, several panchayats or community forums are held and the peasant’s grievances put forth to no avail—did it not matter that the Meos insisted that so many of us fought for the nation in the Great World War, but are now listless bemedalled peacocks sitting on dung heaps in our villages. The tax collectors continue to arrive in the village and the villagers plead for more time— we’ll pay next month, we’ll pay when the crops yield wheat, we’ll pay when we have the money.

Because of the Raja’s orders, the tax collectors keep appearing, a most unseemly sight and always inopportune. One afternoon, a few men finally stand squarely before
the collector and proclaim, “We just won’t pay, even if the Raja himself comes to collect!” The tax collector returns a few days later with a police escort of mounted soldiers. Attempting to seize the villagers, the police fire their guns. The bullets’ echo reach even the ears of the jackal. Three villagers are injured, shot in the calf, thigh, and lower arm.

The villagers are enraged.

Cannot the beggar be seated on the throne- was Yasin Khan not given a seat at the table? Cannot a neem tree be rendered a tarvar, the best and tallest and strongest tree? The escorts have fled. An increasing number of villagers encircle the tax collector.

The tax collector’s eyes bulge. “Who do you think you are?” He pulls out a white handkerchief and nervously wipes his chin.

One of the village men charges. His solid fist hits the collector squarely in the cheek. Quickly blood reddens the tax collector’s yellowish teeth. With a whip, the men grow furious and together they haul the collector to the forest, force him to lie down, fill his squirming, pleading, sweaty officer’s mouth with hot summer sand. It is no easy task to fill his mouth with something so tasteless. Eventually the grains of sand blend with his saliva and drift down the side of his cheek in one clear, winding line. Flailing and writhing, his pistol thrown to the ground, his wooden staff having fallen onto his stomach, the tax collector chokes to death.

Death of the news spreads and officers return to Alwar and resign, stating firmly that they don’t need this employment and please, sahib remove us from this post. Stuttering, one of the men tells the Raja, “You will not get money in Mewat; that I promise.”
The Raja stares at him for a brief minute, considering his words, but then scoffs and waves the men outside with a dismissive twist of the wrist.

Throughout the hillside of Mewat, tamak drums each made of five camel skins heard five miles out, have begun to beat, anticipating the Raja’s reprisal. With the beat of the drums from on high, Meos heed the call to assemble, to fight and defend.

_Dinner at the Raja’s Palace_

The Raja is being warned that Mewat is devolving into another Kashmir. Mewat is trying to rip itself apart from the nation with these men who perch themselves in the hillside, their drums—boom, boom, boom—announcing each time they see or sense an unknown or foreign presence. Disguised men move through the plains while scouts race up the mountain at night to signal when to beat the drum to alert adjoining villages.

The Raja hears about the single rupee they are demanding from each villager in each village for subscription. The villages that refuse to pay subscription are deemed blind of intellect, as if the village’s collective intellect has fainted and fallen to the ground itself—akal behosh hui! They are forming an army. It is the collective mind of the Meos that is lost, the Raja decides.

The Raja invites the chaudhries, leaders of individual villages, to his palace where he doles out the kind of lavish treatment and expenditure usually expended on British or foreign guests. There is even a military band whose violin serenades them at dinner and Meo men smile with downturned mouths in confused surprise. They sit awkwardly in plush velvet chairs. Then they retire to shared rooms and fall asleep discussing the gold-
plated dishes, the exquisite carved wood of the dining room and that strange music lacking a bass or drumbeat of any kind.

The next morning, before the chaudhries prepare to leave, the Raja addresses them and his eyes, which bear a hint of green, shine. He strokes his moustache, no longer than the width of his lips, with curious affection. His speech is reminiscent of his public statement in the *Alwar State Gazette* only months ago: “With my heart which is already overflowing with love and affection for those who are mine, and for those to whom I belong how can I express my feelings? With what hands can I write an answer that trembles in the very essence of my affection? Can I only send you my blessings? Will you also permit me to send you my love?” Only this time the Raja adds, “The matter of payment of the revenue is now left up to you.”

As his officials attempt to compel the chaudhries to sign a statement of loyalty to the princely state, the Raja insists speaking privately with Yasin Khan, taking him into his library, telling him that he can be more than just a Chaudhry because indeed he has the intellect and the education. He was given a seat at the Chamber of Princes! Yasin Khan, the first Meo villager to become a lawyer to study outside of Mewat, at Delhi University, and return with a zeal for political reform, once a young boy whose own unlettered father died chasing his buffalo into the pond, listens carefully.

The Raja walks around the room, casually and gracefully, oblivious to Yasin Khan’s discomfort at the bribe to no longer “incite” the public. They are an unruly people, but a simple people and your few words, the Raja insists, will have great effect on them. The Raja places a pouch of money before him.

Yasin Khan blurts, “Are you drunk?”
“No, no, no.” The Raja coughs with slight embarrassment and then laughs as he takes a sip of water from a nearby flask. *Drink will come later.* The emerald on his finger shines as the Raja takes a sip.

The prince’s dress is a contrast to Yasin Khan who usually wears a long tunic and sarong or sarong, covered with a long black coat, and a cotton turban of white and pale shades. Yasin Khan asks again that the Raja decrease the tax. After all, he says, it was actually the British who first imposed this heavy tax but you refused to repeal it.

The Raja continues, “But your family will be taken care of, you understand, don’t you?”

Yasin Khan declines his offer and shows himself out of the library. When he peers out of the car window at a path of overhanging trees leading to his village, he sighs a sigh of overwhelming relief.

“Did the visit to the Raja’s palace disorient you?” another passenger asks.

“No, *lala,* my shakiness of vision is disgust.”

When Yasin Khan returns home and sits down on the bench in the courtyard of his modest village home, he waits for his daughter to bring him tea. He removes his jacket and then his turban. His hair is patted down squarely against his head from the turban’s pressure. He watches the sun slowly set over the roof, a sunset of pearl-pink, and listens to the calls for prayer. A haze falls over him and his eyelids begin to droop.

“I could not sleep in the Palace,” he mutters, partly to himself, “such large, strange beds…”
Meos Form an Army

Throughout countryside of thirty miles with several hundred villages, Meo men continue to prepare for the Raja’s reprisal, building a militia of armed men, inspecting guns, gunpowder, hatchets, muzzle-loaders, sticks and spears and muskets. The terrain of the Aravalli Hills is difficult with steep dusty paths. Villagers render those paths impassable, building barricades and digging ditches and, where the hill leads into the valley, blocking the pass with stones. Their methods combine Rajput warrior techniques with new methods learned from serving in the Indian Army. Captain Dilwara, formerly of the Indian cavalry regiment, leads the Meo army of 90,000 men from his home province in Ferozpur Jhirka, the leafiest part of Mewat where the land is shamrock green and streams trickle through the jagged brown edges of the mountains. If the Meos possess little formal education, they are well-versed in combat techniques and enthusiastic fighters. Indeed, they have been fighting for hundreds of years now, ever since the Mughals started drifting in from Central Asia and usurping their land. From the eleventh to the fifteenth century, Mewat was repeatedly attacked and ravaged. Babar, Tamerlane, all the great Uzbek leaders and Turks. Fighting runs in the Meos’ blood like an instinct. Even if they lose, they will fight. Even if they lose face, they will fight. The point, always, is to defend their lands.

In December 1932, reports of Meo's misery and resentment appear almost daily in The Times of India, The Hindustan Times, and The Statesmen as “Fresh Light on Meo Outbreak” and “Grievance of Alwar Peasants.” By the quiet light of a desk in Alwar, Muhammed Ashraf, reads the newspapers and pens a document. Ashraf, who bears Meo roots, was not long ago educated by the Raja himself and sent to England for his
education to return and serve as the Raja’s advisor. Filled with the optimism of his ideas on democracy, he returns befuddled by the Raja’s behavior. One day he and the Raja go for a drive when the Raja, the sunlight blinding the Raja, hits a laborer who immediately falls to the ground. The Raja continues driving, remarking on the nastiness of the collision but not the body itself. Ashraf attempts to bring up the subject again but the Raja dismisses it. Some days later, Ashraf meets an elderly man who has worked for the Raja for over a decade but not received his wages in all that time. When Ashraf requests leave for a weekend holiday, he decides then to never return to his post as the Raja’s advisor.

Now Ashraf pens a draft of a Meo charter of popular demands to send to the government and distribute to all foreign representatives, imagining Mewat as its own political entity, traversing state boundaries, a true home for this tribe and altogether free of the Raja’s rule. As he writes, Ashraf feels the distant presence of men perched in the hillside, taking swigs of whiskey from earthen pots nestled in the grass as they wait for the call of the tamak drum.

The Viceroy Comes to the Village

The Raja finally storms through his palace and screams, “Enough!” This group has rejected his every attempt directly or through his officials to placate them, even if none of his offerings speak directly to their demands. When one of his officials has recently tried yet again to offer a bribe to Captain Dilawar, the villagers pounce on his motorcar and break the windows.
The Raja finally climbs into his vehicle and plows down the single dirt road from Alwar leading to Delhi, certain that a facial encounter will bear greater weight than a telegram, despite his undeniable written eloquence. The Raja will lodge a complaint with the Viceroy, even if he is neither fond of him nor the British. He sees what they are doing, slowly taking power away from the Indian princes. But if he does not involve the Viceroy, he realizes he may lose control of the whole situation.

An unknown source leaks this information. It finds its way to Yasin Khan’s ear. “Block the road,” Yasin Khan instructs the villagers.

Meo men chop branches of trees and gather heavy stones to erect small barricades along the dirt path. One, then two, and there are countless more.

The Raja shakes in his long and elegant *sherwani* as he paces around his car, finding countless rocks on the road ahead—rocks as far off as he can see. He returns to the Palace and sends a telegram to the Viceroy, complaining of these bloody Meos’ obstruction. How can he rule this area when he cannot even travel its roads!

The Viceroy fears the complete tearing apart of Mewat, one newspaper report after another prompting calls from London, and himself decides to make a journey to this infamous and unruly countryside. That night Chaudhry Yasin has the villagers again labor all night, remove all the barricades and construct a proper road over the dirt path.

In the morning, the Viceroy travels down the road. “This is a proper, *pucca* road. What is the Raja complaining of?” He marvels in surprise, “Years we have been trying to tame these people, and we have been mostly successful until now. Indeed, the British were first sent to calm the men from these parts.” He continues to speak to his driver in admiration of the British, recalling the first British man sent to these parts, Simon Frasier,
whose fort lies in the Meo countryside. He omits mention of Frasier’s large harem in the countryside, spawning several young Meo girls with startling blue-green eyes.

“Foolish man,” the Viceroy then thinks of the Raja. “Too much debauchery and the mind can be lost.” The Viceroy too has spent an evening or two entertained by the eccentric and indulgent Raja.

A piece falls over in dramatic fashion, a hard knock onto the board.

Checkmate.

Only the Raja vows that this occurrence and the events at Dhamukar will be avenged in a month.
II.

*Listen, my love,*
*do not go to Govindgarh*
*Meos were killed while eating sugar,*
*they are all crying there*

-Mirasi song


*A Large Bird Descends*

1933. The Raja rents an aeroplane from the Madras Flying Club to simply surveil the area, he insists. Yasin Khan hears of his plans and says, “The tyrant has lost his sense,” he says. “The public has been reduced to dust.” That night and the next morning too, Yasin Khan prays, reading extra nafl prayers. Yasin Khan flees to Govindgarh to warn the town, only the next morning, he stares at a sky so clear there is not even a faint line of white.

“Perhaps it is not true,” Captain Dilwara says. “Perhaps you heard wrong,”


In Govindgarh people gathered, spread across long distances. In an open clearing, Yasin Khan announces, "Tomorrow there will be a firing.” Preparations are made to hide in households and abandoned fortresses. Many flee to adjoining villages. They wait as the airplane approaches and flies low around the camp. Like a large venomous insect, it circles and whirrs. But it is not the bird that fires into the crowd-- it does in fact only surveil-- but a Bren cannon behind which soldiers peer out and shoot unabashedly,
round after round, into the crowd. Lewis guns used in the War itself are now fired from the Govindgarh fort.

Some hide behind rocks. One farmer, insisting on cutting the first of the mustard ripened into yellow flowers, is felled immediately. Others run, screaming. High shrieks. As the crowd tries to disperse, feet fall onto one another and there is a trampling of bodies. Some images are so clear--a cream shirt with sharp pink flowers. The rest of it is a shaking blur.

In Govindgarh, the military continues to sniff in all directions, behind rocks and trees, breaking down the locks of wooden doors, forcibly entering homes. They round up Meos in mustard fields. Military men sever women's arms and snatch silver bracelets. In a corner, an infant suckles at his dead mother's breast.

The aeroplane loaned from the Madras Flying Club flies away. Those who were not maimed rush to help those still alive. But there are already so many dead: outstretched, faces down, huddled over. Black crows circle and caw in the afternoon sky.
A Meo Woman Speaks

Yasin Khan informs the Nizam in Hyderabad who informs the Viceroy. Troops of the Central Government arrive in Alwar. When he hears the British are coming, the Raja flees. At first, the British inquiring officer Captain Ibbotson hesitates to step out of the car. He clears his throat. “No one is here,” he says.

In English, Yasin Khan replies, “No, there are people here. You need to get out of the car to hear their stories, sahib.”

Ibbotson emerges and Yasin Khan brings forth a young woman who hides behind her scarf, chewing its ends. Then she begins to talk voraciously like a faucet rendered open and her eyes well up with tears as she speaks of the big bird that loomed high and came sweeping down with men like black crows. The men from the machine, who dispersed into her village, went running through their fields.

Yasin Khan guides the Viceroy to a mud house. There are holes in the mud-caked wall. Prodding the mud, his hand curled into a fist, he bangs against the wall. Bullets, black stony bruised bullets, spill forth.

Ibbotson concludes that force far beyond what was necessary was used. He recommends a decrease of the tax and a repeal of torture and confessions for collection of the revenue among a list of other Meo demands.

Kala Pani or an Exile

The British Government arrests the Raja and strips him of his authority which is handed over to an English secretary from the Central Secretariat. The Raja apologizes and is paraded handcuffed from village to village only it makes no difference. His wife,
the Queen, brings the Raja water one evening and sees the line of sorrow gathered around his eyes.

“All the suffering,” she says, “you have given the peasants has been noted.”

The Raja is outraged and yells that he will exile the Queen from the palace, refuse her water, his cannon nine hands long, his treasury full of money, the cuts from his sword known throughout the world because how dare his subjects rebel.

The British banish the Raja for two years.

For the first time in Meo history, Yasin Khan is designated Chaudhriyon ka Chaudhri, a chieftain for all Meos, in a ceremony where villagers convene to wrap a red and gold turban, one coil after another, onto the crown of his head. The villagers chant, “The Raja of Alwar has lost and Yasin has won- alvar ko raja har gayo jit gaya yasin.”

But Yasin Khan too wonders aloud to Dilwara who has won this match. The Raja, still distantly their own, is exiled. Was Yasin Khan a player or a pawn for the Raja’s exile? He concludes the British could have ousted him much sooner; this Indian prince brought upon his own demise. Black water. The water that is blue and translucent, that can even be sweet, irreparably soiled. When a leader is exiled, they call it Kala Pani. The leader sent to the roof to be only fed buttermilk where he must fend off vultures that sweep into his palms to steal milk.

The Raja is sent to Paris where he mysteriously falls from the roof of a hotel and dies immediately. He is 54 years of age at the time.

The Queen remains in India because she refused to leave home. Her weeping can be heard even now between old walls through the branches of distant, thin trees.

*   *   *

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*   *   *
Fatima had never been a quiet girl. Indeed, she spoke and spoke and spoke.

“Lalee,” Yasin Khan, the leader of the Meos whose tribe spanned three north Indian states, once said to her, “See the beauty in the silence of the trees.” He called her lalee because she was younger, much younger than him, and like a little sister even if not a blood relation. Only she would respond that of course the trees are silent because God made them silent and if God made them silent then they had to be silent, but she, she, she was given a mouth and a tongue and brain all in good working order which meant that God wanted her to expend it all you see.

Yasin Khan had no reply.

But while Fatima may have tired those within her vicinity with the persistence of her tongue, she was a loving girl. Not always of the men and women around, but of her animals and the animals that were not hers by right, but by her own insistent claim. Witness the chicks she kept where the youngest slept next to her, Fatima waking up intermittently to check and make sure yellow fur was huddled in a ball on top of the blanket. While she cooks, elongating wheat dough from small circular balls to lay thin on the flame of the stove, she keeps the youngest nearby.

“What you don't know,” she begins, staring down at the chick, “won't hurt you. Today I went to the well and again these women were asking me why,” and Fatima plunges headlong into her story.

One of the nearby chickens bears several children. Fatima celebrates by gathering all the chicks on the charpai and feeding them seeds. But soon after, all the chicks were killed, perhaps eaten by the stray cat that would roam into the house, despite Fatima
waving it away with a rolled up newspaper with squinty eyes and a winced mouth.

“Ooohhh...yoooooouu...” Fatima would say and the black cat might jump over a wooden pot, tipping it over and spilling all the water inside and flee. Fatima weeps for her children who disappear without a trace. In fact, she wails. Her mother smooths her hair as she moans into a blanket, hurling abuses at the god-forsaken cat that she should have abandoned in the jungle long ago rather than making the mistake of giving it a bowl of milk from time to time. “The devil is in that cat!”

But Fatima's grief over the chicks dissipates when three handsome buffaloes are found roaming around the village without an owner in sight. Fatima runs inside the house, gathers all her free scarves in colors of red, blue, and yellow and beckons the buffaloes to her home with cooing and kissing sounds, tying them up against a nearby banyan tree. Her mother sees the buffaloes bound in an array of cotton and yells, “Let them go! These are someone else's.”

“Well, the owner will have to come and find him,” Fatima pounces, with a sway of the left hip. Fatima would lovingly meet the buffaloes several times a day and speak to them about the day's events, in a similar manner to the monologues she gave the chicks. She introduces the buffaloes to her friends, Safedi and Naseeban.

“They are beautiful,” Safedi agrees, bobbing her head from side to side while Naseeban chews on the end of her own scarf, jealous of Fatima's find. (Fatima is proud of one buffalo in particular whose long eyelashes fluttered.) On the fifth day, Fatima commemorates their five days of friendship by tying an extra purple scarf around the smallest of the three who grunts in response.
The owner, a middle-aged heavyset man, arrives the following day with his son, a brawny young boy. Her mother pleads, “Please, make my daughter understand that these are your buffalo.”

The owner explains to Fatima that his buffalo had wandered off when his son, Jhumma Pehlwan, opened the shed and he is grateful that he has been tied up here and that too with such a loving young girl. He offers to pay whatever amount she wants. 500 rupees, a 1,000 even.

“I don't want any money. Just one buffalo,” Fatima insists as she sees she would lose the other two. “Otherwise, I won't give you any of them.”

“Stubborn,” her mother shakes her head.

Jhumma Pehlwan motions to his father with a raised index finger that they should let her keep at least one; it is only fair.

The owner lets her keep the youngest.

As Fatima grows older, she and Safedi and Naseeban attend every wedding in the village. They jump through large crowds, designating themselves with the special role of examining the groom when he arrives with the baraat. Fatima begins to secretly pray alone in a flutter of whispers, beseeching Allah for the best husband ever.

“Please Allah, please-please Allah, please-please-please Allah…” she whispers, raising her hands to the sky in a most passionate dua supplication. Fatima believes she has a direct line to God.

Her mother overhears young Fatima one day from the doorway, smiling at this latest development of hers.
Only years later Fatima’s prayers came to fruition and she encounters Jhumma Pehlwan again, now the most prized wrestler in adjoining the village. In fact, after seeing her at a village fair, and admiring her voluminous ways, Jhumma Pehlwan asks to marry Fatima. As is common for Meos in those days, they marry through rites of both a Muslim *nikaah* and a Hindu *phera*-circling of the fire.

Even after marriage, Jhumma Pehlwan can eat five kilos of meat, and gulp down another two kilos of fresh milk. When he competes in a race of oxen, his pet wins and as a prize, he is gifted another ox. He loves that won ox truly, feeding it plentiful quantities of *desi ghee* that the ox eats happily with the butter melting against its lips. Jhumma Pehlwan knows how to handle strong-willed creatures. How not to let them tear you apart in their blind desires. How not to softly wilt before their rock-like stubbornness. How to take Fatima's tongue and all its flowing words like a gorge that may never end, let it pour and pour until she grows tired of her own sounds. *Buck-buck* was all he could think of to describe her propensity to talk and not stop talking when she is worked up. No matter what was said that day, they always eat together and the one time that Fatima engaged in a hunger strike in a wash of anger, Jhumma Pehlwan went to bed with rolls of hunger gurgling and tumbling in his stomach. Fatima apologized by arguing with him the next morning while doling out extra helpings of cauliflower and *parathas* and fresh yogurt. And when she finally surrenders to silence or sleep, he pulls her close in the bed, thick biceps like small tree trunks sprawling over her frame, and she giggles in feigned surprise, “Oh, you want to do this now?”

*Now, for the night is oily and laced with sweat. We jostle. Still. Be still. You are everywhere, my love.*
II.

Three years after their marriage, the sounds of all things breaking can be heard during India’s partition into two separation nations. A sound that creeps up in the silence of animal ribs and slivers of hay.

Before that time, Fatima and Jhumma Pehlwan live their life as they had always lived, only intermittently aware of the world and impending black and grey skies. Their home consists of two small rooms with a few scattered books, charpais, blankets, silver dishes imprinted with smiling, wide-eyed flowers scattered in the open courtyard near a small stove. Their movements range from the slippers that slide from room to room to tending the buffaloes outside, baking cakes of dung that smolder as fuel for the fire of the stove, and the harvesting of the fields where mustard flowers and long stalks of wheat stem towards the sky.

Husking wheat, a woman asks, “It's about time you had a child. Aren't you and your man doing it enough?”

Fatima squints angrily to hide the tears welling up. They did, all the time.

Instead she replies, “Mind your own business. It'll come when it comes.” Fatima glowers all the way home. Such comments make her head fill up with hot air that she cannot defuse.

At night she approaches Jhumma Pehlwan, “Why isn't it happening?”

He says nothing but then remarks as he scoops up lentil beans in a handful of roti and downs a glass of milk, “It'll come when it comes.”

But as the months go by, a clock is pouncing and whirring in Fatima's head. Tick-a-tick-a-tick-tick.
In the fields, one woman looks at her across a stalk of wheat, “I was barren too but then I prayed at the grave of Mai Sahiba.” Fatima glances over at her, says nothing, and keeps on. Earlier, she might have snapped that she too mind her own business but today she listens.

“Mai Sahiba,” the woman continues, “cannot bear the sorrow of a woman.”

Fatima does not know why she could not tell Jhumma Pehlwan. Why it became so difficult for her to say that she wanted a child more than anything. Why the thought of it never happening fills her with sheer terror then small black pools of oily sorrow. Why all the love in the world encased in his arms and his irises, a solid definitive brown, sometimes melting and dipping when he peers at her closely, is not enough. Her longing for a child is the first and only secret she ever kept from Jhumma Pehlwan, fearing that he could not calm it and that her loyalties may split like a fork in the road. One day when he went for a wrestling match, after she fed him a pot of goat korma and five thick wheat rotis, and leaned hesitantly against the doorway, her long green head scarf cast partially over her face, bidding him goodbye-good-luck-be back soon-don't-wander-anywhere unnecessary-falthu, she makes a pilgrimage to Mai Sahiba.

With clasped hands, she kneels and pleads before the modest hump of brown earth, “Let it come forward. I'll be ever so grateful. I won't yell at Jhumma. I won't yell at anyone. I'll be good. Ever, ever so good.”

On the festival of Holi, powdered colors are doled out with generous fingers. Smooth it over one check, then the other. Popping green, yellow, and pink. No one can
escape. A paste to slather on the neck, the clavicles. Shrieks of “No, no, no!” A squeal, a dart.

When the colors mix, they swirl into new colors. A blue, a mustard perhaps. A panoply can even lead to a mournful black. Children flee in and out of rooms and houses with irreverent concern for boundaries and thresholds.

Fatima scolds them, a tinge of red on the ends of her hair, but really she doesn't mind. Scolding is an old Meo-Fatima habit by now. Jhumma Pehlwan glances over, his eyes fixed solidly on her profile. She is deep frying potato *pakoras* for those who barge into her house, even as her hands are still caked in red. She eats as she fries, throwing one *pakora* into the mouth, then another. Pop-pop-pop-crinkle. *Yummm.* Admiring her own skills, she spreads the rest on a plate.

“I could play Holi with you,” Jhumma Pehlwan says.

Fatima blushes. A downward looking, eyelids like half-moons, laugh. She pushes him against the doorway and as he feigns losing balance, he smiles, as the Meos say, with his whole set of teeth from pink to blue cheek, nearly ripping the edges of his smile.

When Fatima goes to the fields that day, a woman remarks that isn’t her skirt on backwards and the ties of her *choli* loose and tugs as if to straighten the lopsidedness of Fatima’s dress and being at that moment. “It wasn’t on backward when we saw you earlier.” The woman then said, “Ohhhh, you *are* working hard to make your dreams come true!”

“Of course, I am and as I should be,” Fatima replies. Jhumma Pehlwan himself arrives.
“There you two go again!” the woman remarks saucily.

Fatima too laughs but cannot help herself from throwing a long stalk of sugarcane at the woman’s head dipped back in throaty laughter. Jhumma Pehlwan throws Fatima over his shoulder and whisks her away.

III.

Yasin Khan can see what lies ahead as lines are drawn and lands are carved up. Preparations are made for the shifting of groups across borders but still he knows mayhem will ensue. He discourages Meos who have already had so many of their lands conquered, stolen, usurped, to not let this moment be another chapter in a long and bloody tale. “Stay,” he says, “Stay.” Only he can hear some Meos reply that if they were never really one or the other, never quite Hindu, never quite Muslim enough, riding on two horses at the same time, won’t they have to choose now because everyone has to choose in this new nation? And if they have to choose doesn’t that mean as pucca Muslims, since they have decided on being pucca Muslims, not of malleable clay but definitive stone, shouldn’t they leave for Pakistan too?

“Stay,” he repeats, “This is yours.” And when Gandhi-ji arrives in Mewat, speaking in Ghasera so that it will be the village remembered fifty years hence as the village from which Mahatma Gandhi spoke and put Meos on the map of the desh, Fatima’s father gallops forth on his best horse. He stands in the back, behind endless rows of village men in white dhotis and lungis, dotting the campgrounds like white doves.

“You are the rirrh-the backbone-the spine of this nation,” says Gandhi-ji.
Afterwards, Meos chew on the thought of whether to stay or to leave, to Stay or to Leave, in tea stalls and shops and courtyards and bedrooms. Murmurs and conversations and arguments ripple, overcoming the sound of temple bells and muezzin calls to prayer. Only the nights crawl with uncertainty and Fatima’s father does not know who or what is lurking. Fatima returns to her maika, as she did ever so often when her mother beckons her, and when she awakes to urinate in the middle of the night and sees her father sitting up, sleepily staring into the distance, she demands, “Still awake? Who will come for an old man like you in the middle of the night?” With a clink of her bangles in an otherwise still night, she pushes him down to his charpai, encasing him in a blanket. “Stay chup-chaap quiet,” she whispers, “and go to sleep.” Only she hears a rustling in the fields overlooking the mountains, and her stomach rolls once, then twice.

Only the next day when Jhumma Pehlwan comes for lunch, she tells him, “Gandhi-ji came to our villages yesterday. Gandhi, that little man who knows everything, and he called us the rirrh-the spine of this nation and he told us to stay…”

IV.

During the festival of Muharram, children gather and construct colorful tents for the procession, in competition with one another and Fatima goads them along. “How will this tent win when it has no silver?” she insists. The boys reconvene to decorate the kites and practice sword-fighting, where a different silver glints as knives hit and swipe one another. Some even raise the stakes and attached sharp objects to the sword. Fatima never tires of hearing the story of the martyrdom of Hussain and Hussain for the caliphate Ali. None of them do. If Meos did not know the difference between Hindu and Muslim,
they did not know the difference either of Sunni and Shia and listen to each prophetic tale as if it is their very own. In those days of mourning and remembrance, the women also dance. In a circle, they gather, *habda*, and touch their hearts.

Only Fatima’s father is concerned about her going anywhere in these days of uncertainty and blocks her passage by placing a *charpai* in front of the door.

Mai herself, only a few feet away, throws a stick in his direction and yells, “Are you mad? Let her go!”

A few days after Muharram, as the rumors of mobs looting multiply, Fatima’s father finalizes that he and Mai will migrate to Pakistan. “Jhumma will take care of you,” they repeat.

Fatima does not quite believe their departure and refuses to say goodbye. Only in the ache of her sleep, she calls out “Mai, Mai…” Slowly, she begins to repeat her mother’s name in the hours when the sun shines. “Where is Mai?”

“She’s gone,” Jhumma replies, pulling her to him and giving her head one long stroke.

Fatima watches from a distance as droves of Meos with cloth bundles on their heads walk past her village in slow processions, on foot, in bullock carts. They clamber into trains, free-flying limbs hanging out of windows in a geometric mess. Through the windows, Fatima watches women breast-feed and sprawled out, arthritic legs splayed over a lap, heads falling onto another in a dazed deep sleep while others stare emptily outside. Men huddle together on the tops of the train itself. Is the rapid, ceaseless clicks of the wheels the train shaking or the sky itself? That night Fatima finds herself in a train
dream, dreams of mice running and flapping doors and unaccounted for fires. She dreams of her village disappearing.

V.

Long stalks of sugarcane whip from side to side. A crowd charges through the fields, looking to torch. Despite Yasin Khan’s efforts, nearly a third depart to Pakistan in caravans. Scores of Hindu families migrate to India. In the exchange, mobs riot and attack, trying to further forcefully expunge groups.

“You hide,” Jhumma Pehlwan instructs and Fatima disappears in a room, underneath the bed, her silver locket dangling against the cold ground. She pulls the blanket down from the charpai to make a cave-womb where she huddles in sweltered fear.

Jhumma Pehlwan stands next to the door. He is too large to hide and even if he could hide, he wouldn't. He would take his body and throw it against one charging man, then another. Bite if necessary, break what is required. But the mob passes through the field, and never ventures near their village. Fatima throws up the blanket and slithers out from underneath, placing the silver locket between her breasts. Fear has knocked her into silence and she cannot speak the whole night. Her neighbor bemoans the world, the sky that is falling because of the British, the Jats, the Hindus, and the Meos themselves.

“Where are we?” the man complains, “What is this time?” But silence cuts through and catches hold of Fatima’s tongue, tying it together in one solid knot after another until it is a pink-white mess of arteries and she finally gives way to hours upon hours of cold, black, metal sleep.
The following night, a black crow circles the sky over a single flame in the courtyard. Fatima is dragged into a storehouse of lentils. The blood on her chin and the blood running down her legs matches the red lapel of her tunic. She tries to throw the green scarf back on her head, but it slips off and her braid gave way to strands of free-flying hair. She pleads. Submerged in a room full of lentils, the man far smaller than her Jhumma lies on top of her in sweaty excitement.

“Who are you?” Fatima keeps asking. “Don't you have a mother, you pig? A sister!” He slaps her hard, creating a flaming pink mark on her left check.

“Just shut up, already,” he yells.

Her eyes roll back upwards, straight into the ceiling that is partially cracked. She is not entirely unlettered. She can recite numbers. “One. Two. One. Two. One-two. Three. One. Two. Three- three...” An offbeat syncopated rhythm. She might have begun to hum as if her body had severed, and the rest of her is floating upwards towards the ceiling. Ready to be enfolded in the cracks that came from last year's rain and are never fixed.

“We should have fixed that crack,” she thinks. “Who knows what will happen in this year's rain.” Tears spill out from the sides of her eyes and down to her earlobe. She turns her head from side to side, her silver earrings shaking.

“This is a lie. Where is Jhumma?!”

IV.

Stalks of sugarcane whip in the wind.
Jhumma moans. “How will she survive? Who will listen to her buck-buck?” Blood runs from the front of his forehead to his right eyeball where there is another knife wound.

“Who will listen like I do? Who is capable of love that is like an armor?”

Fatima finds him disfigured, sprawled out on the open earth. And she remembers just then meeting him on her wedding night the first time in a red veil for the first time in a closed room, asking him squarely, “Do you smoke? Because sometimes I do, and taking out a small, thin bidi that so many of the village women sucked in using both hands, crouched in circles.

“Who will listen to my foolishness, now that I am gone?” she begins to plead with him, crouched over. “Now that this black crow keeps coming closer and closer and the sky grows a softer and softer yellow, as if it's a blanket that will spread over the thump-thumping of this pain.”

Yes, Jhumma Phelwan and Fatima are moaning in the sugarcane fields, husks lined with red. Not the physical pain of battered skin, but the pain of leaving before ready. Before the story has unfolded, spread through everything and made itself be known. It is still a thump thumping, a heartbeat, an I want you, you, you, you, yes, this life, this sky...

VI.

A heart can be split open in a field of crops. In a bare room.

“We are all meant to go. To leave this world with nothing, empty-handed.” This is the refrain among those who remained.

“But I am bare of heart,” Fatima wants to say.
No one talks about the women who had disappeared. No one did a head count of all who had died. This came much later by the people from the city. “At least you were not picked up, you were not violated like my daughter,” a neighbor tries to tell her in consolation. “Who will want my daughter now?” the neighbor keeps asking.

Fatima curses her under her breath, but still she never tells her or anyone else about what happened in the room full of lentils. The swish-swishing. The cracked ceiling. The crazed cold hunger hot with sweat and saliva. She does not want anyone to know that Jhumma Pehlwan's wife had been had by another.

That he had lost for the very first time.

“You will learn,” another old woman said, “to bear the grief. But not yet. Now, you can howl,” her hand pats and rubs Fatima’s back. And howl Fatima does as if her mother is still nearby and, it is the day that she had lost the chicks and not life itself.

Until the sound of howling meant nothing and it is as dry and scattered as grains of sand.

VII.

Whole families hop from village to village when news of fragile safety spread.

Neither the old woman nor Fatima have such stamina to hop and hope from place to place. They ride out fate together while mobs spread through homes like ants eating at the stale grain in the storehouse. Grain that she and the old woman still mix with a little bit of milk from the lone cow left in the barn. Fatima who milked that cow is careful not to tug at the nipple too hard and incur its wrath for this cow is all she and the old woman have to create a bowl of oatmeal-mehri. Mehri, the last default. How she and Jhumma Pehlwan and Mai celebrated once celebrated Shab-Raat with five different types of halwa
of scattered almonds and raisins and now she can only taste *mehri* over and over on a tongue lined with dirt.

For all her prayers to bear a child, nothing scares Fatima more now than that very wish. “*Balik, don’t come!*” she yells to herself because she did not know if the child she is carrying is Jhumma Pehlwan’s or the man who barges into her home. She could never love a child who was mysteriously half unknown. She hardly had the means or the desire to take care of herself, much less a young life. There is not enough water and she does not possess the energy to seek it and fight with the others at the well for a measly bucket, she who used to expertly barge her way through large crowds and insist on what was rightfully her own. Desperate women gather water from the paddy fields but nothing makes her want to wade through green leaves for clear water. For days, Fatima has not bathed, her clothes gathering a texture of dust upon dust and she can smell the accumulation of her own *budboo*-sweat. She looks like a madwoman but then so many of them did in those days. She waits as the weeks passed to see what Allah will deliver next. Somewhere deep within, because she still believes she had a direct line to Him, she repeated, “*Balik, don’t come. Child, do, do not come!*”

“*Bathe, you have to bathe,*” the old woman counsels her one day, pushing her with her words like it was a hand thrusting her towards a lake. “*Go.*” Fatima stares at her dumbly. “*Go!*”

Fatima makes her way to the well and reluctantly fights to fill a bucket among the crowd, disappearing into the side of the old woman’s home and letting cold water hit her skin. Thin lines of red liquid ran down her thighs and when she places her hand in
between her legs just to be sure, there it is, crimson and bold. How color had lined her skin the day she played Holi with Jhumma Pehlwan and here it is again.

Leaning her head back against the stall as the water slowly creates a pool of brown that gathered around her feet, she breathes heavily. *Sigh.*

VIII.

Yasin Khan is walking through the fields, surveying the area with some of his men, when Fatima spots him. She comes a-running through stalks of wheat. The comfort of his face, his ruddy face that makes Meos ask him once, “Where were you when beauty was being doled out” to which he replied, “In the house of intellect!” and everyone had laughed. That face, despite its lines now, she needed, in this moment. Still, she does not tell him everything. But as they sit in the fields and she weeps, he knows. He had seen so much suffering now; it was if he knew all its faces and variations.

“You are like my sister now,” he reassures her. His men hear this and this news ripples through the village. He insists that she stay here, here, in this village. That she can stay alone and no one will touch her and she is safe. She will not search the beaten caravan that is still crossing the border for known faces. She knew he knew because his eyes stayed on her for quite some time, as if he could see her in the room full of lentil beans, submerged. He felt her loss, its caves, its echoes, places where light and shadow played, feistily danced with one another. A strange dance that took place throughout the night and left her tired and awaiting the first sun.

“You are my sister,” he repeats.
Safedi who had survived the riots, reminds Fatima one day about her buffalos and Fatima smiles at the memory. Safedi is fortunate enough to remain unscathed and when her chicken bore chicks, she gave Fatima one of them. Fatima could not help but talk to the chick, her only confidant, a trusted gatekeeper, but now her words were broken, intermittent. Fatima who could not stop speaking and raling, whose mouth could not stay its movement even if it desired, began to learn about a thing called silence. Not the silence of words stolen like the man who had lied on top of her and made her count numbers in her head. Or the silence and ringing that comes when pain grows larger than the sky itself and inhabits every pore of the nearby earth. But the silence that comes when words cannot assuage fear and are only spoken upon needing to be spoken. The people noticed Fatima change not over a day or many days. But years.

It took Fatima years.

“\textit{I wanted you to have everything,}” Jhumma Pehlwan says to her one night. He is standing some distance away from her but she could see the water forming in his eyes. His figure looks like it is floating in a sea, even if she had never seen the sea. Still, he is blues and greens and seaweed brown.

“\textit{I do. I have it all,}” Fatima mumbles in half-sleep. “\textit{Even you.}”

Yasin Khan understands that she is groping her way towards silence. His uncle, the \textit{wali-ji}, a friend of God, they would say, had done the same, disappearing into the Aravalli hills days at a time. Yasin Khan smiles when he sees how the silence is in the half-moons underneath her eyes, in the fleshiness of her cheeks as she too begins to smile more. He talks to her briefly, not about the world but how the pigeons love the seeds they feed them and the rains that were hanging like a swollen pregnant belly are late this
year. When he leaves, he pats her on the head as Meo elders do. But he is no longer sure that she is his sister, if she does not resemble his mother now, and if such a paternal action is appropriate.

Years later, when Baba and Mai return to find her, they learn that she had been alone all this time. Only as they see one villager after another pass through her courtyard, seeking her company and aid, they see too that she is not alone. Her village, this village, a site of wreckage and ruins is full and multiplying in that moment. With a single breath on the forehead, Fatima might cool a fever. Choo. The sick and the diseased and those in trances come to her. She sits close by, her arms resting on a stomach, on a hand. And the silence spreads from her to the person lying beside her. Before Mai passes away, she blows on her forehead, running her hand over eyelids and shutting them close, whispering one final prayer. All her words melt into this quiet that knows loss and possibly how to return.

*   *   *
Jannat (Heaven)

Jannat's husband, Majid, was a drunk and when he was inebriated, he would slam doors, slide against walls. He might cry as his body slithered onto the floor but mostly he would nitpick, flailing objects to further his demonstration- *this place is never clean, and out goes a pile of clothes onto the terrace outside.* An orange *salwar*, his white shirts collecting in a heap. He would curse profusely as he dropped piece after piece outside the doorway, taunting those around him with the barely visible edges of his sanity. *See me come apart. Come free.* But like an errant bird with questionable vision, he would not take flight but rather head straight for the wall.

Majid was a tall and handsome man with uncannily symmetrical features and a beard that accentuated the absolute loveliness of his brown eyes and his long, arched eyelashes. And yet, for all his beauty, he had become unrecognizable during those drunken rages that were sporadic at first but over time turned into his normal way of being. And like that, his loveliness began to fade leading to a gaunt, sunken face and sad, lost eyes.

After Majid went into a rage, his rage a sign of a life perhaps, he might cry and slither into a hopeless mass of self-pity, like a discarded handkerchief that still begs to be noticed. It would go on for hours like this some nights and no one slept. Sometimes, the children rushed and hid under beds, behind doorways. Sometimes, they tried to come to Jannat’s rescue, especially if he lunged to grab her shoulders or more disconcertingly, her neck. Majid ultimately did not live very long, his liver wiped clean, but by then Jannat’s mind had started to go.

When Jannat’s mind began to go, as they say, as if her mind had a mind of its own, could leave or evaporate like bits into the atmosphere, it was those around her that
had to keep finding these fragile bits of her and piece it back together. Her teenage son, Salman, earnest and caring from childhood, began to bathe her, losing all shame or embarrassment that she was his mother. Her daughter-in-law, Zeenat, ensured she ate her meals, had freshly washed and new clothes and each night rubbed the soles of her feet that ached relentlessly. Increasingly, Jannat spent time splayed out in bed.

Jannat was grateful to the remaining adults in the house and would express it so but really only found solace in her two grandchildren whom she led by the hand to the market where she would feed them street food like *gol-guppas* and *aloo tiki*, spoiling their appetite for dinner. All that she had left was in these grandchildren and she never grew tired of fawning over them. When their schools opened after the long summer break and Jannat had grown used to the steady presence of their voices, she dissuaded Omer and Isha from leaving. “We didn’t learn to read. We managed,” she would say. But if they had to go, she would perch Isha, the smaller one, on a stool, oil her hair and plait it in a thin, unbendable braid. At times, the braid was so tight, Isha might complain that it was hurting her head. “Nani!” Isha would say in a raised voice and a frown on her face but eventually adjust to the feeling of her head feeling distended.

When the children went to school and there was only the intermittent presence of others and the constant presence of her daughter-in-law, Jannat’s mind began to split a little more. A crack that was painfully visible to others who could contrast her former self with her present one but which she experienced as so painful and confusing, it made time seamless and unending. Nor did she know the boundaries between herself and those around her, talking freely, often only to herself and of greater concern, wandering alone on open, empty streets.
Zeenat who already felt the burden of caring for a near invalid, in addition to two small children, resented this added imposition. She had like most girls her age been reared and prepared to take care of others. But at home, it was different. Her mother was always there, a comforting presence who could guide and counsel and ultimately be the one responsible for the home. The tremendous shift of this burden felt overwhelming to Zeenat. Her husband, Sadiq, disappeared off to the bank daily, involved in his own concerns. Somehow, this house really felt like her dominion, a fact that she knew she should be grateful for and yet could not be. She knew of course, that Jannat could not control her urges to believe that the children were really just outside and calling for her to meet them on the road. That the man selling kulfis in pistachio and mango was actually beckoning her to secure her grandchildren an afternoon treat. That all this was out of her control. And yet, it was still unfair that her short marriage of five years had generated such immediate and persistent hardship. And there was no one to fully feel the weight of Zeenat’s resentment except Jannat herself.

“Stop, stop wandering out on the streets like a madwoman!” Zeenat yelled one day after she and her husband had argued in the morning, Isha had dropped her school tiffin, and Salman had left to the city for a job interview, foreshadowing his expected absence from the house for not only this day but more permanently in the future. Alone in this house with so much to do. And now this. And yet Zeenat knew she had gone too far when she grabbed Jannat’s hand, like a child, and led her forcefully back inside. The neighbors noticed of course and her single statement gave rise to two things. One that Jannat’s wandering was not so benign but which had thus far been masked as not
unnatural for a doting grandmother. And two, that her daughter in-law was cruel as all
mother in-laws suspected their daughter in-laws might just be and both dreaded and
waited for the day that they would show their true, hideous selves.

After that, the whispers and gossip trails began, leading all the way to the well
where the women gathered their water or the jungle where they convened to defecate.
And Zeenat who picked up quickly that she was at the beginning of this trail only
resented Jannat more for being the reason this negative light was being cast upon their
small home. For no matter what Zeenat did, Zeenat had decided, she was bound to fall
short.

Isha who was six by now would run with abandon and absolute glee through the
courtyard in a game she had invented of the flying bird that controls the forest. Zeenat
would smile and shake her head as her daughter ran onto charpais and up the stairs.
“Silly girl,” and then she would reassume character, yelling, “You be careful. If you fall,
I’ll give you a fierce thrashing!”

If Isha wanted to fly, Jannat did too. Jannat, whose body was a formless mass
underneath the equally formless shalwar-kamizes she wore and accompanied by long,
loose grey hair, could not control her irrepressible urge to wander which now began to
exit the boundaries of the road crossing or finding the kulfi seller. She even knew of the
government’s curfew that had been imposed after the riots. “It’s dangerous here.
Everywhere. Guns.” Still, she only wanted to leave. She felt a becheni, a restless
crawling, in this house, no matter its open courtyard.

She had to move.
To control her, Zeenat had the maulvi give her an amulet but it did not make a difference and remained dangling around her neck or tucked behind her kamiz as an ornament like any other. The maulvi did not say if there was nazar, an evil eye of envy and ill-will that was piercing Jannat and their house, and that is why she needed the ornament. He just said that she should wear it to ward off evil spirits. Zeenat who had begun to feel more and more fearful of Jannat’s forays asked earnestly, “Is there anything else, maulvi sahib?”

And the maulvi with kind, sympathetic eyes replied, “and pray.” He saw such cases often enough. But Zeenat was not satisfied and could feel that the problem would only intensify.

“What does nazar look like?” Isha asked one afternoon as her mother sifted through lentils and discarded the spoiled grains. *Sift, sift.* “Is it a big, black eye popping out of the forehead?” She moved in closer to her mother’s face, as if bringing her own forehead closer would make her appreciate the image in her mind.

“We don’t know,” Zeenat replied. “And it’s not really out there. It’s within.”

“Can I give nazar?” And Isha squinted hard at her mother.

Zeenat pushed her face away and slapped her on the behind. “Don’t give or think about giving anyone nazar. It’s evil. Go, go open your Quran and sit down and read like a good girl!”

Zeenat didn’t know if all mothers yelled at their children so much but she was secretly relieved that Isha never took her words too much to heart and instead continued around in the courtyard like a bird in free form.
The maulvi-sahib continued to come to the house from time to time, read a passage from the Quran and blow a whiff of air on Jannat’s forehead and Jannat would smile up at him from the bed, revealing her chipped tooth, her greying hair, a pool framing her face. But Jannat could not stop the voices, as legitimate as any other clear-throated sound that led her to walk out on the pavement and just keep going. One afternoon after Zuhr prayer, she boarded a bus to the city without as much as a word to another. “They'll stop me.” She even lied. “Just going next door. I'll just be coming. Don’t worry so much, Zeenat. You’ll age quickly if you do, like me! “ And she laughed. But when Jannat didn’t return after twenty minutes, Zeenat knew that she had made a mistake. Jannat had never lied to her before but Zeenat should have known. The hard rock in her stomach should have told her to know. Everyone began to search for her but they did not know she exited the door at just the right time because the bus was waiting outside, as if it had been waiting for her all along.

Jannat was gone for a month.

“Did nani fly away?” Isha asked finally, “Did she become a bird?” She liked to think of her grandmother in flight, hovering somewhere near soft, cumulus clouds.

“No, no, no,” Zeenat said, her guilt gnawing at her for that one afternoon lapse. “What was I thinking?” she thought to herself. The guilt caused her to stop eating and sleeping properly and led to dark half-moons under Jannat’s eyes. But actually Isha was not wrong. It had felt like a flight and like a bird she left only a trail of wind behind her, a wind that tumbled and ruffled through Zeenat’s ribcage and kept Zeenat cold all the time, despite how close she sat to the cooking fire or how many blankets she sought for
cover in the December winter. For they did not know where Jannat was. She could be anywhere, in any state.

In fact, Jannat had boarded a bus that took her down Sohna road to the city where she got off at the Nizammudin railway station. She looked distraught as people got down, came in and the bus grew more and more crowded. “The public is everywhere.” But she sat in her window seat and looked out intermittently. She was quiet. It was as if she knew was doing something wrong and might just get caught. When she had boarded the bus, a few people recognized her. She reassured them that she knew where she was and she was going to the city to see the imam’s wife where she would stay and return tomorrow. No one thought to interfere too much and she eventually turned away and stayed appropriately silent and contained. The woman next to her balanced a baby on her lap and from time to time, Jannat would grab the baby’s cheeks, make her cheeks balloon only to puncture them with her index finger and the baby would break out into delight.

But when Jannat finally exited the bus at the station, she did not know where she was going and a panic set in. There was a river nearby with a haze of blue hanging over it and black shadows of birds fluttering and chirping around Rahim’s pink tomb. She felt anxious all of a sudden then. “Where am I?” And when she began to inquire frantically about the next bus home, she was told by the boy who ran the tea stand that the bus back to the village had just left and there was not another one until tomorrow. “Then where do I go?” She asked the question to herself and aloud as if it had just occurred to her that one needed a destination, not only the longing to travel. A beggar who looked like a resident of the railway station, as much at ease there than anywhere, reassured her, “You can
always go to the shrine. If you fall asleep there, no one will tell you to leave.” And the beggar pointed the way past the river and down the main road.

Jannat might have been too proud once in her life to follow in the footsteps of a beggar but she threw her pride aside then and it too fell and dissolved into the river. Jannat slept at the shrine not for one night but many, eating the free food that is lined up and dispensed daily. Eating alongside children who fought over portions and women who stashed *rotis* into their scarves for later in the night. She grew so weary and tired of the roughness of this life of an unclaimed for and yet the shrine was the most awe-inspiring beautiful place, she had ever seen. A huge gold dome with a tomb made of white marble and Quranic inscription that ran along on all four sides. Rose petals covering the green covering on the tomb and men and women who came daily to tie a knot on the small circular windows peering in. In her tattered state, she felt the *becheni* or restlessness lift out of the tips of her feet and cascade into the ground. If the saints could die here, she could too. In remembrance of Him. In prayer and longing, alongside those who felt their own weakness and were not afraid to supplicate and weep in broad daylight in the presence of strangers. In that time, she met many others who came there wishing, wanting, and hoping for something or the other. They would ask to be cured of a disability. To bear a child. To have the sickness of a loved one healed. All their stories made sense to her. But only partially, for theirs were wishes to live on and her wish was only to end, to vanish. This shrine was the only place she wanted to stay, no matter how emaciated or bereft she had and would continue to become.

Musicians, through trails of *gharana*, sang *Qawwalis* each night after the sun had set. There were other women like her, some young, and some old. There for some
temporary refuge, lost in a haze of song and devotion and paucity that they were looking to quickly fill with folded hands before Nizammudin Auliya’s grave. Jannat tied a red ribbon after a prayer of asking. And there were numerous such small strings all around. The voices had grown louder in the past month and now these voices were telling her to die here. *Die, die, die.* These voices were strongest in the middle of the night and each time she heard a voice, she thought she had seen a bat fly by, the passing blur of a black arc. Eventually, she splayed out near a grave, weary of all the noise, eyelids covering her irises.

During the months that Jannat was away, Zeenat’s days blurred into one another. During the first few days of Jannat’s disappearance, she hardly slept at all. As can be common in moments of severe fright, she tried to recount the events leading up to her mistake, telling them to her husband again and again who had gone completely silent, dark ovals under his eyes. But the more she recounted that day, the less clear it was to her, events colliding into one another, shapes and time smearing into one another. As days passed by, Zeenat slowly settled into a more somber grief, praying more intensely than usual. Her husband had assumed the duty of the search. Women from the village would visit her and she would bring them tea and no one would say very much except leave it up to Allah. They would ask what her husband had done that day to advance the search and she would recount his visits to the police station, his nephew who was scouring the city with Jannat’s photograph. And the women would insist that all searches led to a reward. When Zeenat thought she was going numb with grief, a new wave of
fresh, sharp grief overcame her and the walls of her home could no longer house her prayers.

Zeenat finally went to the Nizamumudin dargah to offer rose petals on his grave, to ask for Jannat’s return. At the grave, she saw a woman lying off to the side. She did not know what made her look more closely where the forgotten and the destitute lined the ground in plain ordinariness, but something caught her eye. The edge of a dark brown shawl, ringlets of gray.

“Ammi,” she shook her, “is it you?” She shook and shook her, Jannat’s body rolling to its side, face chalked with dust. “It is you!”

Jannat murmured something but Zeenat could not understand her.

Zeenat grabbed her wrist. There was a pulse still. “Thank God! Come, come here.” Neither Zeenat nor Jannat knew why either had come to the grave, only some days a visit to the shrine beckoned them all. Zeenat knew then that she came to bring her home. Zeenat wrapped the extra shawl she had around Jannat and lifted her upright. Jannat did not recognize her and only stared at Zeenat without expression or interest. Only Zeenat sat there with Jannat for some time, letting her body rest heavily against her shoulder.

“Did you have enough to eat here?” Zeenat asked.

Jannat mumbled, “They give free food at the shrine.”

“But did you eat?”

Jannat turned towards her sleepily and did not reply. Instead, her body continued to remain slumped against Zeenat. It was evening and the musicians were gathering. An
accordion, a drum, a voice coalescing as they sang against the last of the setting sun, having finished the last daytime prayer.

“Ammi, listen.” Zeenat turned towards Jannat, noticing but not minding Jannat’s stench from so many days unbathed. “They are singing for you.” But Jannat’s head did not move and instead pressed more heavily into Zeenat’s shoulder.

Zeenat’s face flushed with pink as they brought Jannat through the doorway. Zeenat ran her hand over her forehead that was warm. She had aged plenty in the weeks that she was away. She clasped Jannat’s hands that were cold, unlocking her fingers. In her palm was a locket containing a miniature of a small, blue bird with a bright red beak. Zeenat put the miniature aside on a nearby charpai to bring her tea.

Isha who had heard the noise from the terrace came running towards Jannat, ready to fling her body against her grandmother but Zeenat put her hand against Isha’s stomach to hold her slightly at bay. Still, Isha paid Zeenat no mind and managed to put her arms around a very frail and weary Jannat and squeal that she was home, finally she was home.

Salman, whose face had also grown impressed with new lines of worry, smiled with relief and after a small embrace of his mother, began to arrange her bed, spreading out blankets and aligning pillows.

That night, Jannat slept for the first time in several weeks on bountiful padding. She slept until late in the afternoon the following day. When she woke, the sun was setting again. She witnessed the occasional passing of birds in the sky, watched the sky give forth a strong swirl of pink and blue. Jannat listened to Zeenat move around in the kitchen and Isha argue with her mother about something or the other. It was a scene,
slightly removed from her but Jannat was conscious that she was also part of it, sitting upright again on the charpai, as she had done so many times before.

In the weeks ahead, Zeenat would nurse her. In gratitude and without complaint, relieved only to know that her lapse had not led to a permanent loss. The sharp pangs of bitterness that used to spike through Zeenat as she was completing a small task but signifying her larger duties dissipated. Instead, Zeenat watched Jannat with curiosity and concern, occasionally squeezing her arm in support, or sitting with her quietly.

When Isha returned from school one morning and she was perusing through the cabinets, she found the locket that Zeenat had put away without too much thought. “What’s this?” Isha went to Zeenat who was crouched near the stove and produced the locket. Jannat was sitting on the charpai.

“Nani brought it from the city,” Zeenat replied.

“Is that true?”

Jannat smiled. “Lalee, I went to the city all those days to buy you a gift,” and she took Isha by the waist and encircled her. This was in fact, the only explanation that Jannat could ever really accept of what had taken place these past few weeks.

Zeenat whose face no longer bore the shadows of burden and the lines of irritation said, “No more need to travel, to leave, to buy gifts. You stay here now. This is your home.”

When others told Jannat that she had been gone for so long, by herself, an aging woman, Allah was watching over you, Jannat could not recollect how she got on the bus or where she went. “I must have left. I must have needed to go somewhere. “She
remembered leaving the house and boarding the bus. Sometimes, Jannat remembered the river. But the rest, she could not really recall. When they tried to tell her that she had been at the shrine, Jannat thought they must have been mistaken. She had only been to the shrine years ago when Majid took her and only once before as a little girl. *I don't even know where the shrine is.* The village women would talk endlessly about Jannat’s disappearance. To think she could have boarded a bus and just disappeared like that. It was close to a fantasy and a horror story all at once. It was what so many of them wanted to do and yet knew the very worst could happen in being cut loose and left asunder in this strange, large world.

In the years ahead, Jannat would continue to fall victim to her *becheni,* enduring the unhelpful treatment of *maulvis* then doctors, but upon her return, for that moment, her body did not desire to float elsewhere but remain here on the ground, this earth.

*   *   *
**Headless Men**

*Stolen Dupatta*

Sweets are not distributed when Hundoo is born. His brother, soon after he was born, had died the year before. Eight babies had died before him. So, not only are there no sweets, but the family does not give Hundoo a name, resorting to the pet name of Hundoo which means *little one*. They do not invest in clothes for him either. Most of the time Hundoo walks around in a shirt that falls to his belly button. The women of the house, giggle at his bottomless dress, as if it is Hundoo’s own doing.

Only as months, then six years speed by it is clear that Hundoo is here to remain. And everyone forgets that his pet name, a nickname, is not an actual name. Hundoo too is more mischievous than his three brothers. Perhaps it is because he lacks a name or an expectation of staying alive. He seems to have less to lose than the rest.

“You know,” begins Hundoo, “we were born in the village of the headless men.”

Hundoo and his younger brother, Mohammed, are swimming in the pond near the house. Mohammed is two years younger than him.

Mohammad thrashes Hundoo who comes back at him with a headlock.

“Headless?” Muhammad asks.

“We were *goondas*, thugs. Some Nais lived here. Our great, great grandfather, came here hundreds of years ago beat them up and took the land.”

“Then?”

“The Nais became headless men. That’s why they call this village Nai Nangla. Naked Nais. At night they wander around, only necks and underwear.” Hundoo laughs, throwing his neck back. “It’s true,” Hundoo continues. “Those *jhaggars* told me. And that’s all *jhaggars* do. Sit around and copy family stories.”
“But if they are really headless,” Muhammad asks, “Where’s all the blood?”

“They are ghosts. Ghosts don’t have blood.” Hundoo lunges at Mohammed now, feigning attack. More splashes in the water. They emerge from the pond and wrap a thin cloth around their small, taut bodies.

“I say we scare Naseema. Be one of those dead Nais!” Naseema is their elder’s brother’s wife. Just last week she thrashed Mohammed on the behind with a rolling pin for stealing sweets from the kitchen. Mohammad has a fondness for eating more than his portion, sweets and fresh milk especially, and is flesher than the others because of it.

“We do it tonight,” Hundoo says. He makes a fist into his palm to indicate his certainty.

“Tonight!” Mohammed agrees and the two boys make their way back to the house.

Hundoo is perplexed on how to be a ghost, and a headless one at that. “Since I have a head, how do I not have a head?” he surmises later that afternoon on his charpoy, a wooden frame covered with a single hand-made blanket, as he stares at the ceiling. He can see a small obsidian-colored bug travel along the side of the wall. He finds it bold that the bug would move diagonally when he is sitting right there. “Salaa,” he curses at the bug.

Hundoo can see Naseema through one of the room’s small windows. Her long dupatta, several feet of a cotton scarf, cover her head. His father, Karoo, whom they all fear, passes in front of her. Naseema is embarrassed because she is required to observe ghungat, a veil of complete concealment in front of male elders. She does not know if
Qamroo should scurry away or she should. She takes the dupatta and pulls it over the side of her face. She rushes passed him quickly, a trail of orange fleeting cloth.

“Dupatta!” Hundoo whispers.

It is no easy task to steal Naseema dupattas. He wants to elicit Muhammad’s help but his fat brother would hardly be unnoticeable if he runs into Naseema’s room. He would probably topple something over and given his fleshy self fail to flee in time. Hundoo, with his thin wiry frame and agility, has to be the one. Muhammad helps him plot which isn’t too difficult since Naseema is continuously summoned by their mother to fetch this or that, cook one thing or the other, run here or there was rarely ever in her room. Hundoo quickly finds her dupatta. Just for dramatic effect, he wraps it around the back of his head and sashays in the courtyard. Mohammad eggs him on before Hundoo returns to his hiding spot in the stairwell that opens up to the rooftop-sky.

After they eat a dinner of roti-subzi, the two boys sneak upstairs and wait for Naseema to finish cleaning the dishes. Their eldest brother, Jamal, retires to the courtyard to smoke hookah and converse with other men.

“She is alone,” Muhammad whispers. “We should scare her now.”

“No, it’s too soon. If we want to really scare her, we should wait until everyone goes to sleep.”

“No, if we wait too long, we’ll fall asleep.” Mohammed’s excitement has started to give way to bloodshot eyes.
“You’re already tired?” Hundoo pinches him on the upper arm, causing a slight red mark. Hundoo, who has taken the liberty of tearing the dupatta in half, gives one piece to Mohammed to wrap around his face.

“Can you see?” Hundoo asks, realizing it is darker than he had predicted.

“A little bit.”

“Well, look real hard,” Hundoo whispers loudly, “And don’t fall!”

The two venture into the courtyard and from behind one of the pillars, glance at Naseema who does not see them at first. They run across the courtyard. When she does not notice that either, they run right in front of the small window of the kitchen.

“What the hell!” Her face gathers in a frown as if she is about to make some hell herself.

In glee, the two boys continue to run back and forth. “We are Nais,” they laugh. “With no heads!”

“You two useless animals!” She runs after them when she realized they have torn her dupatta. They run in zigzags. Because the white cloth covers their faces, they can only see the faint outlines of structures, her beady enflamed eyes coming towards them. Zip- zip, turn, turn. They crisscross across the courtyard in wild, relentless abandon.

Finally, Mohammed, dizzy, hits a wall, nose first.

“Hundoo!” He yells out in miserable pain and rolls over on the ground.

“Oh, if you think you are in pain now, you wait to see the pain that I will give you!” Naseema yells, holding a rolling pin in her hand.

Hundoo rushes towards Mohammed, jolts him, and begins to pull. “Run, run Muhammad! Run!”
Muhammad clambers upstairs, his hands falling on each step for balance, in fear of his life. They hear Naseema yell to the Almighty that she is going to flail these god-forsaken animals, literally skin them alive like the chickens outside. The two boys make it to their room, securely locking the door with the rusted chain. They fall onto the charpoy with the white dupattas still wrapped around their faces.

“Baba is going to kill us,” Hundoo breathes.

“Jamal is going to kill us too.” Only it doesn’t matter. The headless men of Nai Nangla live on, Hundoo thinks to himself.

‘Imran’

That year when Hundoo starts going to school, the headmaster insists on giving him a name. “You can’t be Hundoo all your life,” he mutters in irritation, “This is why they all think we are illiterate.

Hundoo does not know to whom “they” refers to. He does not really care either. He chews on a long strand of hay.

“But I have become accustomed to Hundoo,” he replies. The name Hundoo has authority. It describes a boy who is searching and yet adamantly present. Hun-doo. And the two syllables allow the appropriate inflections for him to read others’ moods.

For example, if Ammi is feeling neutral towards him, she would recite Hundoo very quickly, “Hundoo, go and bring a handful of spinach from the fields.” But if she is angry, she would put an emphasis on Hun, with all her breath and weight bearing down on the first syllable. If his brother Mohammed wants to play, then it is Hundoooonoo.
Hundoo’s name has makes it easy for him to move through his small world of Nai Nangla.

Furthermore, the word, “Hundoo” has a close relation to the verb handna, meaning to wander. Another noun form of it was hundora, one who wanders. Hundoo thinks this is appropriate. Even though he does not have many places to wander, he makes the most of what he has. His mother is forever irritated to wonder if he is near the pond, at the neighbors, lost in the mountains, or just lying on his bed, one leg folded over the over in quiet contemplation.

Just a few weeks ago, Hundoo made the mistake of bending over the local well to see if the inscription on the side really contained his mother’s necklace. Qamroo had built the well and Hundoo grew up hearing how his mother grinded eighteen tons of wheat to feed the workers who constructed the well. Qamroo had taken her silver choker engraved with small stars and plastered it on the inner rim of the well, but in the process of searching for the inscription, Hundoo lost his balance and tumbled downwards. Later, he was rescued by another village, who yelled down below, “What would possess you to go into the well?” as threw a rope over its side so that Hundoo could scale its wall.

Now the schoolmaster is trying to sever this most inextricable of relations. “A Hundoo does not become a local councilmen and handle affairs. Or a teacher. A Hundoo does not even become a farmer. A Hundoo remains a seven year old boy!”

“That’s what I am!” Hundoo frowns, only he realizes that he is not going to win.

“Your name will be Imran. Do you like that?”
Im-ran. So square and stodgy. So manly. It will make me lose all playfulness and personality, Hundoo thought. “It will ruin me,” he replies.

The schoolmaster smiles. “It will not ruin you. Imran means prosperity. You will grow to become your name.”

School

When Hundoo starts going to school, he walks two miles on a dirt path, kicking gravel, and two miles to return home. He slings a small backpack over his shoulder. If he is walking with others, they pontificate as a group on the ways they might skip school. If he is alone, he hums to himself or stares at the sky as if he might learn why he was born into this village at this time. He does not mind walking alone and he does not mind walking with others. It is the same to him. Part of his necessary, daily routine. School is a bore, at first, a chore. He copies down math formulas on his thin notebook, or tries to piece together English words that no one around him speaks.

“My name is Hundoo,” he says in English in class one day. “How are you?”

The schoolmaster glares at him. “You are not Hundoo anymore. You are Imran. Try it again.”

He scowls but he can tell the Schoolmaster will soon give him a thrashing. “My name is…”

At home, he and Mohammad wear brown hats and stand on the bed and pretend they are *videshis*, British foreigners whom they saw once in town nearby. They saw a few of them once in town nearby. Their white skin is so pale and translucent that
Hundoo thinks they are jinn or spirits at first. His mouth gapes, Hundoo and Mohammed do not know then they will live through India’s Independence.

“My name is Hundoo,” he whispers in English. “How are you?” “Go Mohammed, go,” “You be the videshi Britisher.” But plump, slow Mohammed is hardly convincing as a literate and articulate white man. Soon Hundoo begins to act out both parts and render Mohammed the audience.

Over time, Hundoo grows fond of his mathematics class. He is the only boy in his class who knows the entire multiplication times table for 12. The schoolmaster makes Hundoo stand in front of the class and recite these tables. Hundoo emerges an unexpected role model, smiling shyly when his classmates cheer. His brown-black eyes light up. He no longer minds walking the two miles back and forth so much. In fact, he even looks forward to this small trek.

The Schoolmaster finally approaches Hundoo. “The maulvi sahib was right about you.”

“I still don’t like my name,” Hundoo replies.

The Schoolmaster ignores him. “There is a boarding school in Nuh. I want to send you there. You will advance quickly.”

Only when the schoolmaster visits his home and speaks to Qamroo, explaining that the boarding school require that Hundoo live there, *all the time*, with other boys in a hostel far away from their farm, Qamroo looks at the Schoolmaster with suspicion. “Then who will work on the land?”

“He will come back on the holidays and work then.”
“The crops don’t just grow during the holidays, Schoolmaster.” Qamroo says this with a contemptuous look.

“He can remember and respond with such quickness. Don’t let this be squandered. Waste is sinful.” Qamroo does not say anything else and the two men sit in silence. Finally, the Schoolmaster finishes his cup of tea and awkwardly asks for formal permission to leave.

“Bloody hell,” Qamroo Khan mutters to himself when the Schoolmaster leaves.

“What does a boy need with school when the work is with his hands?”

Qamroo summons Hundoo and lets him know in definitive terms that will not pay the boy’s tuition.

Hundoo’s face falls but he does not say anything. No one questions Qamroo. Hundoo loves this village, his brothers. Yet he has grown accustomed to walking the open, empty road and awaiting entry into that schoolroom. He now begins to imagine the boarding school as somewhere further down that path, a place he must also visit and inhabit.

Hundoo decides on a second recourse. He pleads with Jamal who by now has become a man in his own right, resolving the disputes of locals. “I want to go to school. Baba won’t pay. Will you?”

Jamal is a tall silent figure who does not say much but protects Hundoo from the wrath of his own wife, Naseema, for his mischievous antics and against Qamroo’s generally harsh words. For Qamroo, fatherly love is tough and coarse. He eschews softness with other and reserves it only for favored womenfolk.

Jamal assents to Hundoo’s request.
When Qamroo learns that Hundoo is going to boarding school without his permission, he flies into a rage. “All this education is nothing but sin. A conspiracy by those *videshi* Britishers people to take our boys off the land!” Qamroo berates his eldest son for taking such a decision without his consent, his consultation, as if his fifty years on the land means nothing. That those years could be dissolved for *school*.

“Soon we’ll be educating girls!” he yells.

Jamal continues to say nothing, having long ago realized that he must pick battles carefully and at the right time.

Qamroo gives way to his son’s stoic silence, realizing that he has in fact lost this first of battles on Hundoo’s fate.

Within a month, Hundoo is shifted to boarding school.

*Almirah*

When Hundoo begins boarding school, he does not fully realize that he will no longer walk two miles to school and two miles back. Instead, he will *stay* there. The farthest he has to walk is from the classroom to his hostel. His daily routine revolves between the classroom, the hostel, and the canteen. His only company is other boys. Sure, they get along together fine, playing cricket in the open yard most nights. But after a few weeks, Hundoo starts to feel an itch- the itch to leave. Then the itch transforms into something dull and heavier; Hundoo realizes that he is just sad. Buoyant, indefatigable Hundoo is despondent. He drags himself to class. He cannot shake the feeling and one night opts out of cricket.

“Tonight, play without me,” he says. “I’m going to my room.”
Without an explanation, Hundoo enters his empty room. His roommate is outside playing with the other boys. Hundoo’s sadness takes on shades of anger. Suddenly Hundoo opens the almirah, clears away the few clothes in there, and climbs inside. He begin to weep. He imagines that he is facing his village, especially the pond in Nai Nangla.

He finally crawls out of the almirah and phones Jamal from the local telephone stand. In a cracked voice, he says, “Take me home.”

Two days later Jamal comes to visit him. He takes him outside the school grounds and feeds Hundoo paranthas at a local tea stall. Jamal does not say much. They return to his hostel and sit together on his bed. Hundoo is ready to pack his belongings.

“I won’t take you home.” Jamal pats his head. “You’ll come home for the summer. You can’t leave work half complete.”

Hundoo’s eyes well up again with tears.

“I will come and get you next month for a visit,” Jamal continues. “Mustard is rising in the fields. Baba needs you.”

Jamal leaves.

From time to time, Hundoo aches to run out of the four corners of the schoolyard. Then he climbs into his almirah, a place of secret solace with its hot wooden mustiness. He weeps into the lapel of his own shirt. He weeps for the pond, for his mother, for Mohammed, awaiting the weeks when he can return.

_Monsoon_
During the winter break, Hundoo returns to Nai Nangla and the mustard fields are ripe, spurts of bursting yellow, rippling through the village. The cold winter air cut through the bones and contrasts with the warmth of the fire that burns in the courtyard. When he returns to school, he resigns himself to the lonely life in the hostel.

The following summer, Hundoo returns again to plow those same fields. Now he actually misses cutting through the fields, one line after another. There is rhythm and consistency in the farmer’s life. But even Hundoo understands that it is a life that he and his brothers are inevitably breaking away from. The monsoon arrives after the dry winds of June and in one particularly torrential downpour floods everything around. The water rises to Hundoo’s shins. He runs furiously through the fields for shelter, and his chappals, plastic flimsy slippers, flies off. He manages his way back to the house, soaked, and decides to sit on the roof and let the rain beat over him for another good hour. When the rain ends, Hundoo stares sadly at the ground below, for those are his favorite and only chappals. But as the water drains, soaking the earth with its plentiful drops, he sees his red chappals in the distance. He breaks into a full-toothed grin, sprinting down the stairs.

“You watch yourself!” his mother yells, but he is oblivious.

Mohammed runs after him. The two grab each other’s hands, sprinting towards the pond, clothes quickly slipping off as they make a dash for the water.

*Headless Men*

Hundoo skips grades and matriculates out of high school by the time he is sixteen. His loneliness subsides as the hostel becomes his primary residence, and Nai Nangla a
place he visits for short breaks. He applies to engineering school but he is denied entry because of his young age. He has to wait another year.

That empty, open time, left to return to Nai Nangla with nothing to do but wait, makes him anxious. Years later, the village no longer feels like home. He recalls fond memories, but only in fragments. Now the paved and settled structures of the city, crisp white buildings, green lawns, and friends from so many different parts, beckon. He works hard, his natural aptitude not always enough, but each step brings him closer to a place that contains both solid footing and a precarious, delightful newness.

It is called ambition.

It is the Great Surprise.

The boy without trousers who has no name, who was never expected to live, has removed his feet from ordinary soil and bit-by-bit run down the long road before him.

Muhammad, fourteen now, has been seeing the changes over the years. Jamal decides that Muhammad too would go to college. One afternoon, Muhammad stands at the doorway.

Hundoo notices that Mohammed has some facial hair. “You growing a beard?” Hundoo asks, lifting his chin towards the ceiling and giving Mohammed a half-smile. “Like a mullah?” He teases. Both boys still partially mock the religious elders with their long, snowy beards.

Mohammed slinks against the door. His eyes begin to well up with tears. There is so much he always wants to say to Hundoo, but it is never the right time. He, Mohammed, is too afraid. “No, it’s just come.” Mohammad runs his hands over his chin
in contemplation of the very stubbles that are beginning to sprout forth. “These things can’t be stopped.”

“No, my Nai, they cannot.” Hundoo replies.

Mohammed’s cheeks still expand into rosy balls when he grins, only now they are dotted with small specks of hair.

“We were once headless men,” Mohammed reminds him.

Hundoo stares back at him curiously and says, “We’ll always be.”

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It wasn’t that Bilal was fond of shooting his gun upwards into the sky and aiming nowhere- or at least he wasn’t before he started to do so- but given the swarm of birds that circled over the wedding tent, he had decided it was necessary. The birds had the potential to defecate on the tent and possibly soil the clothes of the guests who walked outside of its confines and therefore ruin his daughter’s wedding and so he found it necessary to raise his gun to the sky in the general direction of the birds chirping and aim. However loud and booming a sound it made, a sound that shocked and shook him each time he fired the rifle, did not matter.

He did not have a permit and it was no surprise when the police arrived and fined him for noise pollution and disturbance of the peace. Only he argued so vehemently about the charges- lunging at the officer with scaly, large hands- empowered from shooting his gun in the battle between him and the birds- that he was arrested not for the firing but his subsequent behavior, and placed inside a cell the very afternoon that he was needed most.

When the jail keeper gave Bilal a rough kick and threw him inside the cell asking what in God’s name had he thought he was doing shooting at pigeons and that too for hours on end, resulting in the squawking of the birds, their shrieking, fierce and unbearable, and then having the audacity to attack an officer, Bilal spitted forth the following: the jail keeper was a fool if did not know that his actions were to ensure a happy wedding, consisting of a satisfied wife, daughter and in-laws- and did he mention his wife, and while Bilal spoke all this, his spit spitting forth in various projectiles, right, left, diagonal in a pure mayhem of transparent foaminess, at times falling squarely onto the jail keeper’s ruddy cheeks and occasionally into his eyes causing him to furiously
blink, the jail keeper might have slapped him right then. Only the jail keeper like the rest of us, wanted to hear more of this tale and a slap, a restraint, a period, not just a comma in the story would have stopped it all, would have created far too much white space.

Bilal continued. It was no easy matter with a daughter, a loving daughter at times, a daughter who might bring him milk and medicine at night and lay it beside his bedside, but who occasionally gathered flies in her head, flies that whirred in her brain, circling as in search for honey that they might never find, these flies that kept causing her to run away each time the wedding had been set, might gather her belongings and run off for the hills, a trail of tender lace. And what was he to do but set forth on his horse, his galloping horse, galloping only when it didn’t want to sleep or feed and gnaw on sparse grass and he would have to seize, seize that rare moment of equestrian wakefulness and head for the hills, dipping forth into the Aravalli mountains, before they were stripped of flora and fauna for mining operations, and fetch her from some strange location she had conjured as safety.

“Bloody hell,” he would want to say but he couldn’t. He would be silent and she would morosely agree and jump behind him before the horse tumbled back into slumber. If only he owned a mule that would listen to him, he thought sometimes. If only he had a son who could pick up a rifle and not a girl with flies in her head and nowhere to go. A son, a son who might just listen to him and the two of them could do the things that sons do, if only, if only.

All this, he explained to the jail keeper was why he was shooting up at the birds because this day, this very day, it was essential that he make it all go right. That the daughter with the flies in the head searching for honey and the wife with the silver
jewelry and the nagging like the rope of a well and the son he never had who might have prevented him from being here, in this very cell, at this very moment talking to a stupid jail keeper but one who was still kind enough not to slap him, and for that he was grateful mind you, which is why he picked up his gun and shot it towards the sky again and again and again.

And now, the jail keeper was keeping him, holding him, tying him down by letting him talk and talk and talk when really he should be making sure things were alright under the tent. That there was enough chicken and enough tin buckets to gather the bones of the chicken after he knew the villagers would pick at the bones, tossing it to the ground without a care for the carpet, only wanting more of that chicken, thigh and drumsticks especially. And that chicken followed by ice cream, pink and white and creamy, like the villagers had never had the milk of a cow, like they didn’t drink cow’s milk every day, like they were little suckling babies.

He had to ensure all that and he had to make sure that there was money in the safe. Tremendous money, locked inside a vault, bills piling up in green, crisp wonder that he could conjure forth because he knew after the villagers had their chicken and their pink creamy ice cream, they would sit around in a circle and not let just the sky fall. Not just let the breeze ripple the tent and their shirts and the tendrils of women’s hair nearby, a breeze that would even pass through his daughter in her layers of lace.

Because the men would sit in that circle and they would ask innocuously so isn’t there more. This after he had invited them and fed them but still they would imagine the money, as if it was the thing that they could wrap and cover their bodies and roll around in like a tight-fitted dress. One of the men, would begin the conversation, the ask, as if he
was just another man and not pimp for his in-laws. Not a man whose skin shined with oil. And no one needed to ask what more was, more was known, more was the bills piling behind the vault, as if it was just an ask, a request. More was not a demand, not a shaming.

And yes, there is more he would say. Yes, yes of course there is more, as if he offering more chicken or more ice cream or remembering that he had cake that his wife had forgotten to feed them. To marry my daughter, there is more money.

And the pimp would say that is wonderful and we are so looking forward to seeing what more you have, what more you are offering in your deep and bountiful generosity. Yes, please show us more, all the other men would chorus.

And when Bilal went inside, the women would whisper about the ask, because they had already whispered about the carved wooden furniture and the jeep parked out front and all the other belongings that had been given that trumped this wedding over the one last month. That made this bride more special than the rest. And Bilal would come forth with a briefcase full of bills and the men would pass it on the stage in front of the tent and the picture man would snap photographs, a booming flash, of this ceremonial, unexpected, tremendously generous gesture of the father of the bride.

The jail keeper listened. He had married his daughter last week.

And without a word, the jail keeper took the silver key and thrust it into the lock and jostled it, and released him, signing forth on the papers that waived bail, knowing the trial would not take place very soon. And Bilal returned to the wedding tent and the shrieking and whirring of the birds and the wife cursing him for landing in jail on this
very day and the trail of lace that he imagined in the harsh mid-day sun falling over the side of the house like a canopy of great shade.

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