THE PAPER OF YOUR SKIN
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Translated from Croatian by Mirna Čubranić

I won't remember these days, almost anything about them. They will be bound into the paper spine of confusion like these letters of mine to you, incapable of setting off, of arriving anywhere. I will be confined within them, even when they spit me out on the other side, amorphous, soaked to the bone. I will remember only the feeling of the cold bathroom tiles under my palms and feet, and the unbearable heat lodged under my skin. My body overflowing my skin, as if I had finally reached my melting point. And the rage that engulfs me whenever I think of you, and how I always blame you for all those deaths, although it was you who taught me that dead elements bring harmony to an arrangement, that they make it whole. Dead twigs and leaves, driftwood. You always emphasized that, even though you used to extend their lives thrice the time - of flowers, curls, relationships. Sometimes at this same ikebana table at which I've always been writing to you, in my mother tongue, so K wouldn't find out what a monster I am. The table on which you kept your best vases and vessels. The so-called kenzans, shallow flower holders with pins on which you impaled the stems of flowers to make them stand upright. Big scissors and wires, saws and knives, waterproof adhesive tapes, all kinds of tools. You had skilful hands, unlike me. Hands of action. The plants could be fresh or dried, to represent different stages of budding, blooming, and withering; a reminder that we always live in three tenses. Twigs and stems in three sizes, to represent the three spheres: celestial, earthly and human.

Do the dead remember? Have you forgotten?

These sixteen centimetres of exposed chipboard layers in the middle of your table, a few shades darker than the light brown, varnished surface, where an edge of a VCR once landed, like a handy meteorite. The slash which reveals the softness and the crumbliness beneath the compact exterior, rough under my fingers.

Maybe all you ever wanted was to establish harmony, at any cost. You almost pulled it off.

She remembers her garden, even though it's gone. And him, upright among the daffodils; the fruit bruised from falling in concentric circles around the trees. That's where he taught her to play chess. She buried her Red Queen under a holly bush, because it annoyed her. Because he was always out to get her. She waited for it to grow into a red women's army.

If you think this isn't swing, maybe you should see a rhythm doctor, blares the jingle from Radio Ohio, an American station I got hooked on. Good day, Ohio, what a wonderful rainy day, chirps the host into my hot Bangalore night. A city over a city, like a photograph over a photograph. Just music and the weather forecast, but not even that helps me fall asleep. Through the syncopated beats of the trumpet, those few marimba notes echo again through our unfurnished rooms. An irritating, endless loop in my head, that K sometimes cuts by answering the call. I watch his face change, his lips tighten, his forehead crease. Or maybe I just imagine him like that, as I prick my ears on the other side of the door, listening to his voice which struggles to get out of his throat, hoarse and cracked, as if he were drunk.

I've told you not to call me again, I hear him let out the suppressed anger, pacing up and down the kitchen and turning the tap on to the maximum, so the gush of water would drown out his next words, so I wouldn't hear when he says he has nothing to do with it.

I'll report you to the police, he threatens the caller, repeating he has nothing to do with it.

Then he turns off his phone and tosses it onto the kitchen counter. He walks away from it like a character on a stage. He never talks about it, never tells me the sentences spoken to him on the other side of the phone line, which would be repeated here in italics. He opens the fridge; I imagine his face bathed in its light, like the face of a saint. He grabs a damp bottle of beer, slams the door shut and goes to the living room window; then he gently parts the curtain and looks out onto the street. Searching for the silhouettes under the streetlamps, as if they were the fucking Lili Marleen. Is that the habit I've picked up from him, or he from me, I wonder as I approach the bars of the ever-open window, empty-handed.

I replay in my head everything I did an hour ago, checking if I have locked all the doors: the double glass one at the top of the exterior stairs, the one in the hallway, and this one of my room. Then I pull back the curtain just enough to have a crack into the outside world, and breathe in the scent of the warm pastry from the shop across the street, which threads itself through my pores like a dental floss: tea biscuits and cakes glazed in bright, toxic colours – neon pink, harlequin green, cyan. Spongy Lego blocks arranged into pyramids behind the dirty glass of the showcase. When I crave for them, I remind myself that they are just symbols, that one can't eat a language. Their scent is intertwined with the hormonal rot of the ruby pomegranate seeds in a bowl which I left long ago on your desk, covered with paper, but is nevertheless surrounded by flies. Pomegranates are in season throughout the year, the whole year here is a kind of summer, and my biological clock is permanently haywire.

On the concrete railing of the rooftop terrace above the pastry shop, a demon sticks out its tongue to ward off evil, as if a tongue had such power. By the tracks across from the Mosque Road, the colourful little church of St. Anthony looms above the tin and cardboard hovels of the slum, the kitsch of hopefulness, but I'm not interested in him now, he reminds me too much of you. I fix my gaze on the back of the man who pisses on the side wall of the church and zips up his fly in the blind alley of your memory; a gesture which is always followed by relief, of one kind or another.

K is in the north, photographing textile workers near Delhi. A project for which he has received a government grant. His works exude a sweet madness, said a famous Indian photographer in the recommendation he gave to the committee. K is an artist who has already fulfilled all his promises.

He is often away even when he is in the city. In the afternoon, when he returns home, he asks if I have already eaten. That is also the first question he asks rickshaw and taxi drivers as soon as he settles himself on the backseat. The question used in this city instead of a greeting. It is intimate, motherly. It quickly sinks through the layers of the psyche to the bottom of the pelvis, like every other question we cannot answer, or ask.

That's why I don't ask him about those calls.

I don’t know who is on the other end of the phone line. I only know that they are men and that it is all somehow connected, with you at the centre. K has told me it is some unfinished business I shouldn’t get involved in.

One day he’ll explain, he said. Just not yet.

I look for them, but I find only the usual suspects. The men who sit beneath my window all day long on their motorbikes. Smoking and waiting their turn at the men’s beauty parlour Gentleman, which is open late into the night.

The Gentleman offers a fresh wedding look, says the sign above the entrance, written by hand in the wavy, three-dimensional Futura font in blue and red, bringing to mind the dramatic Indian film posters. The men comb their moustaches down, into apostrophes or single quotation marks. They frame the mouths that speak, what comes out of them, like a permanent smirk.

He wishes it weren’t so, but I still don’t feel at home here; almost all movables are yours. I am a foreigner surrounded by your possessions. An intruder. The other woman, even though I know you wouldn’t have minded sharing him with me.

This is our first house in this southern city, your city. Our first attempt at a home.

Yours are the plates, some of them chipped, made of porcelain, and the metal ones with the compartments that at first reminded me of prison and school canteens, but I slowly acquired the taste for them, like for drama. Your pressure cooker, in which I prepare for him the same meals you did – rice and dal – but mine never have quite the right flavour and texture, I will always be your apprentice. I’ve repurposed your big wooden bowl for mixing dough into a salad bowl; the stone pan you used to make millet and masala dumplings, K’s favourite, I consider a kind of artifact and don’t use it at all, I just occasionally run my fingers across it to confirm that pans can be made of stone. Yours is the South Indian coffee maker, which I stole from your beauty parlour, thinking none of the women would notice. Yours is the gas oven on the kitchen counter; the only new thing is the gas bottle we connected it to. We drink from your glasses, I press my lips against the glass washed clean of the traces of your lips, I wipe my hands on your dish towels. We sleep on your mattress, and sometimes it feels like violation, sometimes a wave of discomfort, even disgust washes over me, but I don’t want to hurt K, or spend money unnecessarily.

Maybe I have just gotten used to sprawling myself into the chalk outline your body has left on various surfaces, still warm.

The other day I nearly crushed my left index finger hammering nails for your paintings into the living room wall, but K still hasn’t brought them, wrapped in your saris, from the little rooftop room of your old house on the other side of the city. Exclusively botanical motifs in bright, experimental colours. Extravagant flowers plucked out from their natural habitat, forced to pose in your kitchen. Your fetish, even after you, a sociology graduate, fell in love with hair – because there’s no business like the hair business, you used to say. Because you earned the money he spent.

Mine are only the thin wine glasses, which keep breaking in my hands one by one, like baseless arguments, as if I had his hands. Those glasses are also the only things we ever bought – them, and a few cotton bedsheets with small, hand-printed elephants and the matching pillowcases with zippers. Because they are yours, the dark blue curtains at the bottom of the cardboard box under the empty frame of your bed have been eaten through by moths. Otherwise I would have gotten them as well, as a kind of reverse dowry.

Like the housewarming present from K's friend Ishani, an artist who recently rented a new studio nearby, who gave us a lamp with the shade made of paper coated in beeswax and the flowers she found pressed with a hammer and wooden blocks between the layers of paper. I love that lamp; it leans over the edge of your table like a suicide. When I switch it on in the evening, the wax gives off a pleasant smell, and the flowers emerge in the backlight, like the delicate, dendritic phantoms, a dead nervous system. The soothing olfactory effect of that lamp is automatically undone by the visual.

Good tools increase your odds, K told me when he gave me a nice fountain pen and an ink bottle I always keep within reach. He didn't say for what.

When he calls and asks me how I have spent the day, I say I've been writing, everything is fine. I don't mention the obsessive door-checking ritual. Or the fact that I sleep with a large kitchen knife under the mattress, or don't sleep at all.

Instead, I tell him there's still no water in our neighbourhood. I don't know what to do, I say, it's becoming unbearable. He tells me again that it is something that often happens, that the city will dry up in the future, because the rivers that feed it are running dry. We just have to be patient. I ask him to check anyway, so he calls Bangalore's water supply from Delhi to ask what is going on. They tell him there is no water in our neighbourhood, that the whole city will dry up one of these days. We just have to be patient.

Like every morning for the past ten days, I take the large plastic bucket by the front door and walk down the dusty road to the communal tap. The women and children laugh at me, shouting: the white madam is going to fetch the water. They know nothing about my historical vassal status.

I hope I will never be like you.

That is why I light a cigarette when I come back inside. In the kitchen, in your nightgown, the one I put on only when K isn't around, as if I were putting your skin over mine. My small excess and denial of what I've just said, your light cotton nightgown with the faded lace on the collar, torn at the seam in one place, as if someone had tried to rip it off and stitch it onto something else, the nightgown K wrapped your glass fruit bowl in when he packed your things, so it wouldn't break in the move.

The kitchen door opens—barely, but still—onto a narrow balcony which is under a constant siege by pigeons. Whenever I carry out the plastic tub of wet laundry, I have to turn it vertically to squeeze it through the opening, taking care that nothing falls onto the carpet of dried

pigeon droppings, above which the clothesline hangs. The nerves of wires are everywhere, and down on the ground, a stiff half of a dead pigeon over which, for days now, flakes of plaster and the ash from my cigarettes have been falling like snow.

Our neighbours mustn't see my naked skin, it's better that way, K once told me. They might take it as a provocation, as disrespect, an act of hostility. Maybe that is why I go outside in this sleeveless nightgown, because I know you would have never done it, you didn't fall for cheap provocations. You didn't consider them effective, and maybe you were right, though in the end I questioned even that. Your small inconsistencies, your tendency towards paradox. My inability to fully unveil you, to understand what drove you and why K loved you so much, loved you unconditionally as one loves the dead, even while you were still alive.

Why can't I do it?

At 2:40 I hear the doorbell. I approach the watercolour outlines on the other side of the double, dirty glass. I let him in. The man, saved in my phone contacts as Water Guy. I watch him take off his flip-flops and walk barefoot into the kitchen, carrying a twenty-litre plastic barrel of water on his shoulder, sweaty, with the veins in his neck bulging. He sets the barrel down on the edge of the counter, so I can easily place a glass or pot beneath its spout.

He also knows that K has been away for about two weeks now; this is the second time that I have opened the door for him, strict and tight-lipped. The water guy sees right through it all, he knows I have to drink. I feel ashamed of my aloofness next to his teenage-like face and his grizzled hair. But it increases our odds, I tell myself. I am not sure for what.

When I lock the door behind him again, I'm struck by the vastness of the empty space, as if now seeing it through his eyes. As if the space was the only thing I wanted when I came here, the space diminished by nothing, the space where I can think. Books are the only thing that grows in number, day by day: collections of contemporary Indian poetry in English and Hindi short stories, for the anthology I am working on with P. Older women's travelogues, for myself. Women botanists, butterfly hunters, adventurers.

Traveller's Prelude by Freya Stark and a selection of entries in the diaries of Isabelle Eberhardt.

The botanical painter Marianne North and her Recollections of a Happy Life.

Butterflies and Late Loves by Margaret Fountaine.

Isabella L. Bird, This Grand Beyond.

Because I'm afraid of the illegibility of landscapes, because I always prefer to travel through the text.

I sleep during the day, when images flow in the semi-darkness of the bedroom.

K had fastened a wool blanket over her large windows when I first landed in the city, at four in the morning. So the light wouldn't wake me, he said, thoughtful from the start. The blanket has been hanging there for a year now; it has turned the room into a cinema.

Through the round holes at the top of the improvised curtain, the liquid street is projected upside down above our mattress. The yellow-green autorickshaws flash and vanish. The rain

trees spread their filigree crowns downwards, while their roots are somewhere up, drawing life from the air.

The trees in the Garden City bloom at every time of the year, carefully chosen for that purpose when the city was still being planned. Over the years, the city has expanded, and the number of trees has decreased. Birds sing at night, and trees bloom when they shouldn't, I've read in a local journalist's column. Because of the poisoned air and the rising temperatures. They want to reproduce while they still can.

The men from the neighbourhood wear blindingly white crocheted caps that never slip from their heads as they confidently walk upside down along the road. Unlike La Linea, the spasmodic white line, my walkers don't curse or hyperventilate when they reach the end of the line, they don't demand a god from the machine. They simply walk on, invisible, somewhere out of the frame.

Safe where I am, I watch those diminished, fragile, almost comical men, until something suddenly interrupts the transmission - a cloud or a gigantic body of a truck - when the light spills out, and they fade into the silent backdrop of the wall.

I look at the wall as if it were a blank page. I don't know if it can bear what's to come.

What a nonsense – a lady's saddle and the sidesaddle riding in skirts, thought B. By some miracle or irony, if you are a woman, the abyss always opens on your left. If something happens on a narrow path, there is nowhere to dismount but into the yawning void.

Would I like some cinnamon in my tea, the poet asks, placing a tray of cookies of various shapes and ingredients onto a wooden stool he has pulled to the couch on which I am sitting. There is no space on the small table in front of me, it is covered with books. Collections of poetry written by his mostly dead friends. A novel by Cyrus Mistry, The Radiance of Ashes. You can do with them what you want, he says, handing me a metal saucer whose sides briefly catch the reflection of the dancing god on a wooden base in the corner. I nod, and the poet breaks a cinnamon stick and drops the shards into my cup; the intensity of the tea is sharpened by that intervention.

Short and slender, in a white kurta and white trousers, he seems almost ethereal. A tuft of grey moustache above thin lips and a shiny bald head, as if of molten metal.

He, too, was an anthologist when he was young, he tells me; he knows what it's like. He hopes the authors are treating me better than they treated him, though of course, he can't say they were all that bad; otherwise, there wouldn't have been an anthology.

He talks about other writers, perhaps I'd like to know, he says.

M's novel is brilliantly written, but women generally don't like it; too much drugs and sex, and too many curses in Hindustani. S is a man of the city, although he likes to present himself as a man of the pen. I am a poet, he says although nobody asks, but he's not a poet, far from it. At best, some kind of a prose writer. He was silent for forty years, he says. During that pause between two collections, he worked as a literary critic, which left him no time for writing poetry. Now, with distance and experience, he thinks it was pure laziness; he sees no point in writing about writing, even less in writing about what has been written. He's grown old, he doesn't intend to repeat his mistakes. He has devoted himself entirely to listening to the ghosts, who are

closing in on him. He feels their crowding together. What he hears, he translates into verses. He no longer does even the basic household chores.

He looks around carefully, as if checking something, clasping the warm teacup to his bosom. The room is conspicuously tidy and full of well tended plants. On the wall behind the poet's back, a big gecko jerks – an animated decoration on the otherwise bare wall - but then freezes in place. A few times it moistens its eyes with its tongue, because its species has no eyelids. In those moments, the tongue is the only thing alive on it.

Anthologists are always authors in the closet, aren't they? What exactly am I working on, the poet asks me and soundlessly sets his teacup down on the edge of the little table; a flash of vertigo.

Does he really want to know?

Why not, he replies, and I realize that his question has caught me off guard, just like the day before, when the twenty-year-old amateur magician and parapsychologist Dinesh, still chewing the remnants of the lunch we'd ordered from a nearby Kashmiri restaurant, asked me in his ninth-floor Mumbai kitchen to telepathically connect with his friend, the current Miss Universe India. The friendly, tall girl with the large feet in transparent platform heels, who had that morning shared with me almost every detail of her nomadic childhood in Singapore and Melbourne and Hong Kong, as we inhaled the fragrant smoke from the hookah on Dinesh's couch - Persian apple, he said - was now standing two meters away from me; the hem of her black mini skirt was aligned with the kitchen sink. I closed my eyes and tried to summon the face I had been staring at up until a moment before. Dinesh stood next to her, that I remember clearly, although a memory must be carefully reconstructed even after such a short time. On the pane of the window behind me, the outlines of other skyscrapers and crane tips were reflected, the muffled rumble of the city lapped at our eardrums, so relentlessly that we no longer registered it. Everything we ever said to one another was strained through it like fruit through the layers of gauze. We heard only what we wanted to hear; we extracted the meanings at will, out of necessity.

I felt his fingers caressing my upper arm, moving so lightly from my shoulder toward my inner elbow, as if tracing the beginning of a spiral. Startled, I opened my eyes and saw his hand wrapped around the biceps of the beauty queen, who was smiling photogenically; his touch travelled through time.

In a year, Dinesh would test his techniques on Bollywood stars and Arab sheikhs; his photographs would be in all the major newspapers. But what happened with the phantom hand that was touching me?

That afternoon in Dinesh's kitchen was not the first time I asked myself that question. The first time was much earlier. Ever since I arrived on the subcontinent, I had the feeling that I was holding one end of an invisible, synesthetic rope, and something unknown was holding the other. I knew it by its tension. But the rope ended in darkness on the other side, and I couldn't see who or what was at its end. This city, this country, you? Me, but another me? I tried to pull that rope towards myself, to bring that something closer, but it seemed that the only thing I could do was to feel my way along it, hand by hand, word by word, as I filled my notebooks.

I was a diligent collector of scenes, sounds,and scents, my epistles to you from the world of the living. The bells and the murmured prayers at dusk and dawn from the temple across the street from our second apartment. The men doing laughter yoga in the park across from our third apartment, next to the fountain in the shape of a pink-and-blue swan, their forced, mad laughter which always pushed me over the edge. The petrichor one June afternoon in the gardens of the Central City Library. The city as heavy as I was, when I longed to curl up beneath its shallow foundations and sleep. To sprout after the rains.

Everything reminded me of something I couldn't name, an emotion I couldn't quite pinpoint; it was fragmented, in pieces, like a shattered mirror. The delta of K's chin. The blind bhajan singers, who weave among the headlights of the vehicles near the Tippasandra market in the evening, holding each others fragile hands, the blind leading the blind; a ripped-open jackfruit with its embryonic flesh that tastes like a gummy candy, as if there was nothing natural in it, so sticky that you have to put coconut oil on your hands before you touch it; water would only make it stickier, I was warned by my acquaintances.

A few months ago, it was jackfruit season. They were everywhere.

He wouldn't mind being recycled, the poet tells me, surprised by my silence. His mother tongue is dying out, he answers my earlier question about the Farsi language. His people brought it here long time ago, but the language never took root. Even the towers of silence no longer belong in the city; the number of vultures is decreasing, and other birds only scatter the human organs, drop them onto the nearby balconies. In the morning, the citizens go out for a cup of tea or coffee, only to be greeted by someone's liver.

Mumbai used to be more merciful to its inhabitants, he says.

In the taxi on my way back home, I think about taxis. I would like to offer a driver a flat fee one day and let him choose the streets for as long as my money lasts. Because you used to do something like that, K told me when we first met. You would get into a taxi or an autorickshaw and tell the driver to go wherever he wanted, you'd let him know when to stop. The men were puzzled, some of them protested, but they obeyed you anyway. They stopped when you told them to stop; I bet you liked being able to count on that. Afterwards they would watch you hail another taxi with your raised arm and continue in the same direction or return to where you had started from, most often just back home. As if even your determination was expendable, circular.

You moved chaotically, to mask your stillness. So you wouldn't have to give it up.

And also because taxis are the best entrance into the city, aren't they? You put the metal on like an extra skin, like a shield, even though actual collisions do not seem possible here. The metal and the glass constantly rush at your body, only to swerve at the last moment, leaving you unscathed.

I love that game; you loved it too.

The synchronized parting of vehicles and crowds, that always seamlessly close behind us again, like a cut that instantly heals. Without leaving a scar.

You must wait, the poet told me, when I said I still wasn't sure what I was really writing about. That very morning, at breakfast, a discarded grape stem reminded him of human arteries.

The peel of an orange looked to him like the skin of an old person. But those are isolated images, he said. They acquire meaning only if you can connect them to an external or internal world. On their own, they are just clever self-indulgence.

I was still staring at the orange peel, Priya, barely sensing the skin.

Maybe I still don't know how to ask the right questions, like you did. Is this all right, is it better now? Too cold, too hot, too fast? Just tell me. How are you feeling?

Women didn't feel pain, which is why they loved talking to you during their treatments. One Goan woman confessed to you that she felt like Christ when you grated away the hardened skin on her heels. You're welcome, you replied, and that is how your client base grew; some of them came even from Chennai, Kolkata, the overseas diaspora. Just for those questions, to hear their own answers to them.

No, it's fine, I reply to the taxi driver after he flicks his half-smoked cigarette out of the window, spits loudly onto the road and asks if I would mind if he closed all the windows and turned the AC to the maximum. The feeling of claustrophobia washes over me, but now at least I can let the scarf I was holding over my mouth fall into my lap. I silently ask the driver not to check the rearview mirror too often, not to remind me that I am a woman. My wish is granted, because not once does he remind me he is a man; I am grateful for the inattention he gives me. A silent ferryman, he leaves me be and keeps his eyes on the road. I am not there, except in the frames that line the road. The glass facades of the skyscrapers painted with the hues of the setting sun, the cathedrals of newspaper offices and pharmaceutical corporations' headquarters, and the rare, broken sidewalks and tents with their movable possessions below them. Who taught you to drive, you motherfucker, sister fucker, you idiot, I hear from the other side of the window, as if through water, and I remember how, trapped in the hard currents of traffic, K sometimes yells like that, while I breathe into him from behind, through his shirt, and the skin on his neck becomes a high relief of bulging veins. He, too, feels safe only in traffic, deafened by hysterical honking and humming of petrol and diesel engines, so he lets you rise, like the oil to the surface of water. Not you, but the fact that you are not there.

Should I turn the AC down, the driver asks and then suddenly brakes; my hands fly forward, my spine sways like a whip and hits against the seat. The noise is unbearable: cymbals and drums. We have stopped to let a funeral procession pass. Through the windshield, I see the body on a stretcher, wrapped in white, and the fragrant smoke. One hand dangles unnoticed above the bowed heads of the relatives, like a deliberate mistake in solemn, sacred paintings. The artist's signature, an attempt at humour, or a way of saying he's the only god here?

The driver adjusts the white rosary swaying from the rearview mirror; I haven't noticed it before. He looks into the mirror and, for the first time, really speaks. In his broken English, he tells me about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. He says he has converted only recently, that there are no castes in Christianity, nobody is worthier than other human being, and everyone has something to eat. The only thing he struggles to understand is the logistics of an imported religion, he says and asks me for the exact coordinates of the afterlife.

The last time K saw you, you were sitting in a palanquin. Had you been over seventy, that's how you would have been buried, with your legs tucked beneath you and your hands in your lap, as if you were meditating. But you were only fifty six. Your face was the focal point of an elaborate floral display. Less than twenty-four hours after death, as per Jangam rites. Still fresh, the body is first buried beneath sack after sack of flowers, sprinkled with salt and only then covered with earth. A perfect compost. A seedling. Your solemn face above the faces of your friends, family, clients. The one you had withheld from them until then, the one you had spared them from, now had no other choice.

The faces are most themselves without us.

It was the second anniversary of your death, and I had just moved to your city. K took me to your grave, to perform a brief ritual. For you and me to finally meet, he said, clutching the small heads of red roses we chose at the nearby flower market, together with the garlands of jasmine, with petals still damp from being sprayed, which the florist packed for us in white plastic bags. Your younger sister would take care of the rest. The older one had long moved to Arizona; you never managed to visit her.

I had imagined your younger sister more like you, robustly cheerful and full-figured, but she was petite and seemingly timid when I saw her a little later, hurrying down the path with her husband and her thirty-year-old son. She greeted us with her eyes and immediately got to work. Still catching her breath, she took the bag with ritual items and offerings from her son's hands and set it down on the dusty ground. Then she carefully unpacked and arranged everything on the two palm leaves her husband had handed her earlier: rice, vegetable curry, fresh cucumber salad, fried lentil-flour patties, small bananas, mango, coconut. On a copper plate she placed a pinch of turmeric, vermilion and a few grains of rice, mixed them all with water using her fingers, and dabbed the mixture around the letters of your name.

Priya – it was the only thing engraved in the square slab of stone I stared at, as if by doing so I may summon you from the dead. Your name was in Latin script, unlike the Carnatic whorls on the surrounding graves, on which Shiva's erected penis was the centre of the deepa, the bowl for offerings. Potency in death, as if one must die like a man, even though some of the garlands draped over those simple, greyish monuments resembling shrines were brittle, desiccated.

It will take the stonecutter another seven years to engrave your full name and the years of your birth and death, although he had been paid to do it. Until then, you will remain simply Priya - dear. Only that intimate invocation in stone, like the beginning of an epistle.

Dear Priya, I will repeat on these pages, fully aware that this phrase will always be a kind of pleonasm, a saccharine excess, my attempt to lull myself into remembering, or forgetting. Like your sister, who burnt incense and murmured in the voice rendered monotone by the oldness of that rite, until I thought she would never stop. Trembling and fragile, she also had something tough, a resistance embedded in the bird-like body, a sneaky defiance. She seemed capable of everything, although she would probably never need that ability, simply because she already had it. Or maybe it was envy, her resenting you for the dramatic way you finished it all. How you always were and remained in the limelight, even in your death.

Her son just stared at her, motionless and gaunt, more an idea of a body than a body itself. I hardly noticed her husband; he stood behind us, at a safe distance. Superstitious and disinterested. When she motioned to him, he cautiously stepped closer, and holding the same plate with our right hands, we all traced three circles clockwise. We waited while birds gathered around us.

Soon the crows around your grave were too many to count. Every now and then, a new one would join their ranks on the roots and branches of the rain trees, on the dusty ground, on nearby graves. They watched us, always at a distance. We expected them to react in some way, but nothing happened. They just stood there: a dark, feathered guard. In English, a group of crows is called a murder, I remembered as I was enveloped by the same, heavy scent of dhupa, that would descend upon me once more many years from then, when I came searching for you alone and didn't find you, despite the Latin script of your name among a sea of unreadable signs, when a man wrapped in a blue dhoti, with a subdermal bump in the middle of his forehead and a drunk, bloodshot gaze, told me to hurry up because the cemetery closes at six. At six the snakes come out, he said, it's their time, you have to leave. Later, in the hotel room, I listened to the voice recording on my phone and heard the loud cawing of crows, followed by a drawn-out call of a bird I couldn't recognize. Then something fell hard against a solid surface.

It was the strange bird with blue eyes and iridescent black feathers. It appeared out of nowhere just as we were leaving your grave, and with its gently curved white beak, it began pecking at the rice in slow, measured motions. It wasn't in a hurry and it didn't seem too bothered by the crows three times its size. But the ruffled feathers at its neck were the sign that it was aware of them.

Where did it come from, I wondered. And what species was it? None of us knew.

K photographed the scene, discreetly as always. There were no other birds like it around.

Fucking bitch, I thought. Fucking daredevil and addict.

K screamed in his sleep again last night. I just gently placed my palm over his mouth, then on his shoulder, turned him on his right side and slowed down my breathing, so his would sync with mine. Later, his shoulder was damp with my sweat; I let it dry there like a coat of varnish on wood, I recall as I get out of the taxi and rush towards the Churchgate railway station, running past the wounded dogs who are lying in front of the eastern entrance, beneath the white facade studded with air conditioners, across from the beige art deco Eros cinema building and the Indo-Saracenic opulence of the railway office, one-dimensional by malnourishment, like dog patterns on the dusty, shaded concrete, when they slowly peel themselves off it, lift their gaze and prick their ears that look as if they were cut with zigzag scissors, the dogs that don't understand they have no chance, that one cannot roam around so damaged, that muscle isn't fur.

I run even once I'm inside, beneath the metal frame of the dome and the long-necked fans. Past the multi-purpose stalls garlanded with packets of potato crisps and the shoe shiners sitting on the ground, always in a state of readiness. A little girl holds out her hand, but quickly

lowers it, realizing that there is no time for our interaction; I avoid the boys selling tea. Various scents hit me one after another, mixing and evaporating: cardamom, urine, menthol. Aside from sweat, nothing sticks to me. My throat and lungs are tight as I jump onto the moving city train heading north, towards Bandra. I take the first free seat; I am lucky, the carriage is packed, as is the next one. A drop of sweat runs down the length of my spine. Then another, which reminds me that I have a solid axis. My heartbeat slows down as the images of garbage heaps and nylon shelters speed up; I lower my gaze to my hands, which are full of the books the poet gave me; all those collections of poems by his dead friends, for which he couldn't find a bag, I now place in my lap.

Did he want to get rid of them? Or was he trying to secure them a posthumous translation into a small European language? His friends, the burden on his coffee table, now passed on.

Outside, the overhangs of bright tarpaulins and decorative gestures bordering on irony: curtains with floral patterns at the entrances to the rooms the size of the first television sets. Ditches of boiling excrement and clean clothes hanging on the lines above them. Palm trees and the moral verticals of the skyscrapers in the background. Crows and seagulls pecking for food. Black and white.

I feel a metal taste in my mouth, as if I'd been rolling a coin under my tongue the whole way here.

The student's mouth is firmly closed. He sits across from me, staring at the laptop in his lap. Wedged between two men, like I am, he sweats and fidgets, glancing alternately at the screen and at me. The train brakes frequently and suddenly, our knees touch. The student pretends the contact doesn't bother him.

We are surrounded by other young men, mostly in office-blue, synthetic shirts, with the strap of a leather bag across their chests; some have plugged their ears with earbuds, from which I hear the chopping music, others are talking on their phones, holding onto the overhead handles that jingle like densely placed ornaments; some are hugging the backpacks pressed to their chests, trying to make themselves as small as possible. More male bodies are at the wide-open door, leaning out to catch the wind, their shirts billowing like sails tightened by the tendon of the hand gripping the rail. As if those shirts were driving the train forward.

A disciplined female voice recites the names of the stations. I rely on it like on logic.

I think of you. I remember how live flowers were your favourite. Mostly seasonal, sometimes exotic - chrysanthemums, bird of paradise flowers, with all those punkish spikes instead of petals, for which you used to say that carried its gravity on its green spine and all by itself, in a simple vase, looked like it managed to defy the laws of physics, as if it were not just a flower but a bird as well.

Every Thursday in your living room, at our table, you held ikebana workshops, gathering both your idle neighbours and the national champions in floral displays. Through the minimalist arrangements of flowers and twigs, you taught them how to refine their inner architecture, to structure their scatter, to develop their own floral heart through the delicate handling of

something so fragile. With your thoughtful plant installations, you actually pointed out at the negative space around everything, at the emptiness or ma in Japanese.

In the Carnatic language, ma is short for mother. Mother as a negative space? Is that what you were striving for?

Is that what I am striving for?

When our knees touch for the sixth time, the student stiffens, lifts his thin body off the seat, clutching the laptop tighter so it doesn't fall to the floor. Madam, he shouts, contorting from his head to his toe, on the verge of tears. Keep your legs to yourself.

I look at him, unblinking. Then I lower my gaze to my legs; I still don't know where to put them. One man leans into my face: What are you doing here, in the men's carriage? Don't you have eyes?

When I finally head for the exit, I feel them in my shoulders: the men who begin to speed up, slowly at first, then gaining momentum to the point where they will try to pass through each other. Through me.

I breathe into someone else's diaphragm, shallowly, a hand lands on my chest, another on the small of my back; I breathe into the lapel of a man whose face I can't see because there is no room to lift my head; we dance. An intimacy I didn't consent to, a closeness I never asked for. Like your and mine, dear Priya.

Then a blow from behind, between my shoulder blades, knocks the air from my lungs. These men will break my bones, but I won't notice that because their bones will hold me in place.

I tense my muscles and push against them with all my strength, shoving them away from myself and towards the wall with my elbows in their backs and bellies; I am ruthless as I breathe through their skin, draw oxygen from their bone marrow, until I break through their bodies to safety, to air.

I got out, I tell you under my breath as if you were listening, as if you had ever listened. Palms down, I press my back against the partition wall by the door, and I let them spill out onto the platform like a torrent. I miss my stop and get off at the next one.

She is afraid it won't rain. There hasn't been a drop of rain in months; the situation is truly alarming. The birds are starving because nothing is growing. She doesn't care so much about the birds as about the sprouts and seedlings in her garden. About the carnations stripped to the bone.

I was there when he handed the keys to the company that bottles and sells water. He said it was theirs now: the house for which you took out a mortgage the same year you rented a space in the nearby part of the city and opened your own beauty parlour, Priya's Herbal Beauty Clinic. You chose both locations carefully, double-checked everything, first with a lawyer, then with your uncle. You signed the contracts.

You bought that house to have something solid, something the wind couldn't blow away. And it is still there. Solid. It survived even you.

That day, your rooftop terrace was covered in a deep, fresh snow-like carpet of withered leaves and the flowers of the gulmohar tree, which had almost completely lost their bright red colour. K told me how much you loved that tree, that came here all the way from Madagascar. You said that its red blood cells covering the streets were the symbol of the city, that they made the city alive.

The concrete balustrade and the edge of the exterior stairs, which connect the terrace to the front yard, were lined with the pots of your withered flowers and herbs. So many of them. Stems and leaves crumbling at the touch. More like an autotype of a garden than a garden itself, as if the carbon pigment particles were flaking away before the eyes of the observer, under my fingers, making it clear that the image doesn't have a strong binding tissue, and maybe never had. But you must have known it, haven't you?

At the foot of the gate, a cigarette butt lay; the kitchen countertop was still stained by the last meal that the workers paid to thoroughly clean the place and repaint the walls had there two years ago. Signs that K hadn't stepped inside since, not even to show the house to the many potential tenants. He would light a cigarette at the gate and let them tour it on their own, and return with their impressions, like probes.

In the front garden, where you grew ornamental and medicinal plants for your skin care preparations, the garden which only seemingly grew wild, because that is exactly how you wanted it, still stood the same guava tree, in surprisingly good condition. K has told me that he clearly remembers its sweet fruit all year round. There were only three we could count that day. Three, just like the number cigarette butts in the hallway, I told K when I came back from the house, since he didn't go inside that time either.

Then I leaned against the gate and watched K and the new tenants, two men who wanted to make sure one more time that the roof wouldn't fall on their heads, climb the stairs to the terrace. I remember the dense, filigree canopy of trees – the gulmohar with its light green, double-pinnate leaves like delicate ferns, the jamun, African tulip; wooden hands reaching out toward one another, and the feeling that the street, like all other avenues in this city, drained you, grounded you, pulled you down, as if you were pregnant or dead, or both.

The tailor across the street was measuring the sleeves of someone's light-coloured shirt, with a thick pencil between his lips; he followed his own movements through the glasses at the tip of his nose, which looked like they might fall off at any moment. Little risks he took to break the monotony of everyday life?

In front of his open shop, the moustached men gathered around a bhelpuri vendor breathed through their cigarettes. They weren't speaking. Every now and then, the tailor glanced in their direction, then back to his counter. As if that something he was waiting for, hoping for, still hadn't come.

I heard the hammering against an unyielding surface at a nearby construction site. Two scooters boldly glided into the intersection, where your street branches off from the four-lane

main road with gyms and shops and restaurants. Then I heard barking and a Bollywood riff, when the blue Maruti parked in front of the neighbouring house started reversing. The right thumb of a man compulsively scraping the taut surface of a red balloon, while another, white, floated above his head like a smaller, more oval version of the false moon above the lovers in the photograph by Manuel Álvarez Bravo. Then nothing, and then a long whistle of the train to Chennai. And always the crackling sound that palm trees make, as if something were slipping out of its bearing, a reminder that every Indian city is actually holding an ancient jungle at bay. For a while longer.

I didn't see her coming; I just saw, a moment later, her limp arms hanging over the iron gate, as if she were preparing her skin for tanning. She ignored me and called out to K, who was in the yard, holding a piece of paper on a hard-covered blue notebook, so the older of the two men could sign the lease agreement. I'm coming, I heard K shouting from the centre of his chest, the way he does when he wants to signal that everything is moving too fast, that it is all already gone too far to be caught up with. Like you.

When he finally came out, the woman started adjusting her purple sari, shifting her thin braid from one side of her neck to the other, as if she found herself uncomfortable in her own skin.

Really?! she said. Finally, that's good news, right?! Do you think they will stay? The company? Oh, maybe it's better that way, it's different, those people won't sleep here, will they? They'll just work here, receive their clients, right? Sleeping is something else completely.

K was silent; the neighbour already knew the answers to her questions. He glanced towards the tailor, then at me. The balloon vendor passed right behind us, heading in the opposite direction, this time without the false Moon.

His thumb was still. No train had passed in the last few minutes.

But the water, of all things? You know what they say about water. Well, if they don't mind it, why should we make a fuss about it? They've found a way, you say? Of course they have, this is a good neighbourhood, always has been. Safe. Nice people. You've told them everything, haven't you?

The new tenants signed the contract, but so had some before them, only to change their minds. It wasn't something that couldn't be taken back, contracts are not carved in stone. Even the astrologer with a PhD from the same street knew that. Months later, K found out that he would always approach the potential or new tenants, and offer them his services. Every rupee is an investment, the PhD astrologer would say, something has to be done. But no one wanted to invest more, they preferred to give up.

She had long been planning to have her family photographed, the neighbour continued, getting to the point, to the price of her silence. Would he be interested in something like that, she asked, as if she were giving him a choice. He could drop by one of these days to discuss the details, she said. It would be good if he photographed her family over a certain period of time, not necessarily on ordinary days, but at celebrations and similar things. Children grew up so fast,

she was afraid she would miss the key moments in their lives, she hadn't been able to sleep for years because of it, and now this, she added, glancing over K's shoulder towards the window of your kitchen, as if she might see you there. He understood, didn't he?

You understand, don't you, she switched to English and looked down my shins to the tips of my toes in flip-flops. Since she arrived, she hadn't acknowledged my presence in any other way except by that one hostile gesture.

But if they were captured on film, she continued, now staring at K's closed mouth, then she could return to those moments later, right? She didn't have to watch over them every single day in panic, when she had other things to do. K would make her life easier, she said, it was impossible to see everything by yourself, remember everything by yourself.

Of course he'd do it for free, he told her. He'd drop by later that week to make the necessary arrangements. He had always wanted to be a chronicler of children's birthdays, he told me after she left.