

the memory hereafter

It was a cold winter night. The house was silent as I took my glass of milk and a book to bed. The boys had gone with their father to the snow and would come back the next day. As I settled in with the book I heard the house creak in the silence. I turned off the light but sleep did not come immediately. I twisted and turned in my cold bed; my feet felt like they had frost bite.

I do not know when I finally went to sleep, but I began to dream that I was walking up the street to the shops in our neighbourhood. I looked over my shoulder at the receding

shape of the house. It was square with a window on each wall and a front door that opened onto the garden. The house was painted white, the paint peeling off in places to reveal the yellow from long ago. Terracotta tiles slanted off its roof. The garden seemed to overflow with toys, mostly footballs and tennis balls, surrounded by a freshly clipped hedge on three sides. The wind had blown the autumn leaves under the hedge and onto the garden beds. I made a mental note to sweep them away in the morning. I tightened the wool scarf round my neck and pulled the beanie down on my head before turning to head up the path.

It was a cold, blustery day and I tucked my hands deep into the pockets of my overcoat. The nature strip was dotted with hordes of white cockatoos picking up nuts, which had fallen from the trees above. The birds looked fierce: their oversized bodies bent over the giant cones as they glowered at me over their hooked beaks. I winced a little when I passed one but it ignored me completely, bent as it was on destroying the nut it held in its claws.

So, in my dream, I walked through the speckled landscape to the building at the end of the block.

I crossed the road and continued to walk, but this time under the awnings. It was a bit protected there. From the corner of my eye, I

saw pieces of rubbish that the wind had made airborne scurrying along on the road. The wind whistled; it made me want to run inside and when I reached the corner of the square I took a right, sprinting to get inside the building. But something, or rather someone, was blocking my way. It was a woman, old and tall, or at least she sounded old when she said sorry. But when I looked up I saw her eyes were the colour of the sea, and shone with youth, crinkling at the corners. They were set in skin which was taut, and without any wrinkles. She did not look sorry at all, and I wondered what was so funny about bumping into a stranger. I stepped to one side to let her pass. But she stuffed

something into my right hand. Stunned, I looked down at the piece of paper in my fist. My first reaction was to let it drop; it was then that she whispered in my ear, "Read it." I looked up but she had gone.

When my eyes opened it was morning. The light from the sun cut its way through the slit between the blind and the window, slicing the bed in two. I reached out for the cord and pulled it. Outside, it was a clear day, perfect for a walk. I put on my jumper and wrapped the shawl around me before getting out of bed and going to the bathroom. I looked at myself in the mirror. The memory of the dream was fading but I felt a little uneasy

from the encounter with those piercing blue eyes.

Outside, there were cockatoos everywhere. I walked towards the shops; each step an effort. I wondered if it was the cold. When I reached the corner, I almost expected to bump into someone. It was a weekday and most people were at work.

Suddenly, the wind picked up and a scrap of paper flapped against my face. I tried to brush it off but the wind blew harder making it stick. The paper had a musty smell and felt brittle as it clung to the contours of my face. When the wind dropped the paper floated to the ground. It was yellow with age. I stared at it for a few minutes, finally stooping to pick it

up from the ground. I did not read it, but walked into the café.

Inside, the café buzzed with life. The door shut behind me with a loud bang, but no one seemed to notice. The wind was wild outside.

I walked up to the counter and ordered a coffee and a brioche, looking at myself in the glass cabinet. I pulled the scarf and beanie off and adjusted my hair; it was dark and long. Brown eyes stared back at me; thin eyebrows that curved away from each other, one slightly higher than the other, shaded them. I tucked my hair behind my ears and waited for the man behind the counter to give me my change. Then I walked to my usual table at the back of the room. The chair

squeaked on the concrete floor as I pulled it out. Someone had left a newspaper on the table. I glanced at the date, Tuesday, July 8, 2008, before looking down at the scrap of paper in my hand. I tried to make some room on the small table, but in my haste the newspaper slipped to the floor.

“Clumsy as ever,” I mumbled, as I picked up the papers from the floor and placed them on the empty table next to mine. My eyes returned to the piece of paper in my hand. It was old, tattered and torn; like it had been thrown around for a while before it had found its way to me.

“Flat white?”

“Ah yes, thank you.”

I pressed the paper flat on the table and peered at the faded ink: blobs of ink flowed out as organic shapes from the words, indistinct forms of a bird or an animal. I couldn't make out anything at first, but slowly the sentences started to make sense.

*And though thou speakest not my tongue,
Woman, thou knowest
from thy heart,
that the poet in me has ever been thine
own guest on this
earth, the guest of love.ⁱ*

It was signed in a language I did not know.

Later that evening, I was reading the newspaper when I saw the car turn into our driveway. I put the paper down and rushed outside to greet them all. I knew that my

husband wouldn't believe me when I told him what had happened, but I would tell him anyway.

The car door opened and my husband and three little boys jumped out. Saleem, who was seven years old wore a bright orange beanie. He was continuing an argument with his brothers when he saw me and ran into my arms.

“Mummy, do you know the snow was so white! And we made a snowman, and, *them* we went skiing, and, *them*, Imran fell over at least a hundred times.”

I laughed, “*then*, Saleem, not *them*!”

“That's what I meant, Mum.” Saleem sulked.

“So what if I fell? Even Ali fell a few times. Main thing was that I tried.”

“That’s true, very true.” I looked at my husband and we shared a smile. His eyes twinkled as he said to me, “Yes, he was very brave and I’m very proud of him. But it was quite funny when you slid all the way down the slope,” he continued, looking at our oldest son and they burst out laughing. I joined in the laughter, glad that they were all back safely. I helped unload the car and followed them inside to the welcoming warmth of the fire.

The house, which had been quiet a while ago, was now filled with the sounds of tiny feet running on the wooden floorboards. I

asked no one in particular if they were hungry. The only voice which responded was that of my husband, “No, but can I have a glass of water?”

I stepped off into the kitchen and got some water out of the tap. When I returned with the glass the children had rushed off into their room. I gave it to him and sat down on the empty chair beside him.

“So you all had a lot of fun?”

“Yeah, but I missed you. And so did the boys.”

“Actually, the house was very quiet without you all. I missed you too.”

“What did you do?”

I showed him the piece of paper I had found, or which had found me.

“What is it?”

“The wind blew it into my face, and I picked it up when it fell on the ground; something I learned from the kids! There is a poem scribbled on it, by Tagore. I’m sure it’s Tagore, for I looked it up. It’s from the Purabi collection. And this particular one he wrote when he was a guest of Victoria Ocampo in Argentina, in 1924. And see it’s signed? I can’t read it properly but I do think it looks like it says Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali. I compared it to his signature in a book and it does come close to the original. Hard to say

for sure. It's torn at the edges. But isn't that interesting!" I looked up at him.

"So what are you suggesting? That the piece of paper has flown all the way from Argentina or India—across time—to you?"

"I don't know what I'm suggesting. Just that it's interesting," I said.

"That's so like you," he smiled. I gave him a faint smile.

I knew that it was hard to believe. And I hadn't even said anything about the woman in my dream.

My thoughts were drowned out by the shouts of the boys in the other room.

The next day, as I walked to the bus stop, I saw a woman sitting on a lone bench, waiting for the next bus. I smiled a hello at her and sat down. I noticed the startling blue of her eyes. There was a small mole just above her upper lip. It stretched slightly as she smiled back.

The bus arrived and I let the woman board it first. Her gait was slow and wobbly. Inside, the only seat vacant was the aisle seat next to her. I sat down on it, smiling at her in acknowledgement. We started talking.

“I think it will rain. Look at those clouds in the distance.”

“You’re right”, I agreed, “it’ll snow on the ranges.”

“I really miss my country on days like this.”

“So you’re not from here?”

“Argentina.” she smiled. “And are you from India or Sri Lanka?”

Now it was my turn to smile. “India.”

“Ah, do you know the story of Tagore and Ocampo?”

I looked at her; I could feel my eyes go round and my mouth opened of its own accord, but only to say, “I do know, a bit”.

Victoria first met Tagore through his poems in the winter of 1914. It was a cold winter evening and she was alone in the room with no one else but the memory of the

man she loved: the one who had, at times, given her more pain than love.

She stood next to the fireplace reading aloud from Tagore's collection of poems. The cold marble of the fireplace burnt into her back, akin to the dread she felt in her heart.

...The sky is overcast with clouds and the rain is ceaseless. I know not what this is that stirs in me—I know not its meaning.

...a moment's flash of lightning drags down a deeper gloom on my sight, and my heart gropes for the path to where the music of the night calls me....ⁱⁱ

She closed the book and looked outside. Darkness had fallen among the trees. The

clouds hung low and looked ready to burst any minute. A dog howled in the distance. She had never felt so alone in her life. She opened the book but she could not see the words clearly anymore.

The rain came, but it was not from the clouds.

I looked at the woman then. I did not know what her name was: she had not said and I had not asked. Was that a tear running down her cheek? Embarrassed, I looked away. She continued speaking. I was now looking at the other people in the bus. But they appeared to be in another world. A woman glanced at me and then turned away. As she did so she started to dissolve into the fabric of the bus.

One minute I could see her body, opaque, blocking out that which was on the other side of her and the next minute, her form became translucent before vanishing from sight altogether. The old woman's voice now filled the empty bus. It came to me in waves, like an intonation, increasing in volume till it filled each and every corner of the now empty vehicle.

The seats swivelled on their sides and moved towards the outside frame, the poles following the seats. The frames of the large, rectangular windows closed in all around us, blocking all light but that which streaked in through one round hole in the newly formed walls. There was something or someone

resting on the bed under it. I could not see quite clearly, like someone who has just come into a darkened room from outside. There was movement still, but unlike being on the road, it was more like a swaying. As my eyes got accustomed to the darkness, I realized that we were in the cabin of a ship. The old woman—but stop, she was not old anymore, but younger, in her thirties probably—and she was saying something. At first I thought she was still talking to me but then I realized that it was to the man in the bed. He lay there, with a rug covering the lower half of his body. His white hair glowed. He held his head tilted to one side as he listened to the woman speak. When she had

finished speaking he opened his mouth to say something.

His voice was gentle and lyrical, like the waves, which I could now feel under my feet as they held this vessel in their hands. I looked back at the woman. She seemed mesmerized by his voice too.

The cabin vanished as suddenly as it had appeared and I came back to reality with a jolt as the bus pulled to a halt.

I glanced at the old woman. She had become silent. Her eyes had glazed over and she was lost in her own world. I wanted to ask her what had happened in the cabin back then, but words would not come out of my mouth. I stole another look at the woman and

this time I was sure of the tears streaming out of her eyes, which she did not care to hide, or maybe she had not noticed them.

This was the last stop and people started to get off the bus. I remained seated, waiting for the bus to empty out before I got up. I played with the ends of my scarf, looking at the woman every now and then to see if she had come out of her reverie, silently willing her to continue with her story. The last person stepped off the bus. The driver looked into her rear view mirror and called out to us. "This is the last stop, Ladies." From the window I saw a rather largish woman standing outside. She wore long robes, she had a hunch in her back and her weight was

supported by a timber walking stick, which she held in her right hand. She would have been in her 80s. She seemed to be searching for someone. Her eyes came to rest on the woman next to me and she started waving with her left arm, afraid to let go of the stick. She was shouting but the glass was so thick that I could not hear a thing. I got up and moved closer to the door. The words started to become clear:

“Aunty Victoria, let's go!”

She was waving frantically now. Finally, the woman I had been sitting next to realised that the bus had come to a stop, and shaking herself out of her thoughts, she got up with an enormous effort and shuffled after me.

I looked up questioningly into those aquamarine eyes as she neared. She was unruffled as she returned my stare. I could see myself in those eyes. The eyes pulled at me, and against my will, I began to move towards them. I felt the ground give way beneath me as I was drawn into their depths.

I walked into what appeared to be a deep sea. The water was warm and welcoming. I looked back the way I had entered, into the light. It was then that I saw it, the face of the man from the ship's cabin. White, shoulder length hair curled about his face. He appeared to be walking and talking to someone at the same time. And then a path came into view. It cut through a meadow,

dotted with yellow and orange flowers, which raced to the horizon. The man came into view again; this time he was looking into the distance.

“Do you see that thing lying in the grass?” a voice echoed from the end of a long tunnel.

There was a white shimmer in the distance, the sun reflecting off a big piece of metal perhaps.

And then another voice came, this time it was female and it was louder, even clearer: “Yes, I think I know what it is. I should ask J6se to move it a bit further away from the path. A number of animals when they’re close to their deaths wander near the house. Sometimes the stench can be awful.”

“I thought it was that. All life must come to an end. As must all meetings.”

His face came into view again. “I would like to see it. Do you want to come with me or will you stay here?”

There was the sound of laughter. “I think I’ll come, Gurudev.”

The man smiled. The shimmer got closer and closer and then metamorphosed into a bony structure. There were two sets of feet on what seemed like gravel and the skeleton of some creature lying in bleached grass. The light from the afternoon sun glanced off the dry, crumbling bones. A gust of wind obscured everything for a second. When it had died down the skeleton came into view

again, only this time parts of it had already become one with the dust.

“When I am gone, you’ll remember this.”

The voice caused reverberations in the sea: slow and gentle.

When my eyes opened it was dark. There were loud noises coming from outside. A door opened somewhere and pinpricks of light hit me. I peered out. There was a small room with a round hole in one corner. Day light spilled from it onto the bed underneath. There was a doorway to the left. On the other side of that doorway were three men. They spoke in Spanish as they heaved a heavy chair into a corner of the room. Their bodies

were burnt from too much sun and their hands were rough, the veins hard and knotted as they carried the load.

“Thanks for that chair. It’s a kind gesture and it’ll make me think of your furniture poet.”ⁱⁱⁱ His face came into my line of sight, he was smiling. “I’ll write to you. I do hope you’ll write back.” Suddenly he looked sad and much older.

“I do hope we’ll meet again, Gurudev. I might have the opportunity to go to Europe in a few months’ time.”

He nodded his head and smiled again. Light fell on his head, framing it in a soft radiance.

“I’ll leave you now, Gurudev.”

Outside, in broad daylight, the sky was the bluest I had ever seen. A railing went around all the people and beyond was the sea where a million suns sparkled. I could feel a gentle swaying under my feet. It slowed down when I saw solid ground. He came into view again on the deck of the ship. He waved.

There was the loud sounding of a horn.

Gurudev's ship got smaller and smaller as it moved away from the shore. I saw him turn away from the railing. And as he did so, clouds gathered in the sky. The sea, which shone blue a moment ago, was transformed into a grey, turbulent mass. People ran from the deck and into the relatively safe spaces of the ship's interior as large drops of rain

began to fall. He ran in too, straight to his cabin.

The sea was very choppy now. Waves licked the sides of the vessel, the sea now unleashing its anger on itself. It reached up and water spilled on to the deck of the ship.

And then, it stopped just as suddenly as it had started: the menacing clouds washed away leaving behind no evidence of the storm. The sun played on the waves as it jumped from one ripple to the next making the water shimmer endlessly so it looked like one giant mirror.

“Goodbye, Gurudev.” A taxi came into view. The door opened and then the voice said something in Spanish.

It all went dark.

A slight haze filtered through.

Outside, silver dashes rippled on a dark surface. Things became a bit clearer and I could make out the horizontal bar of a railing. Two hands curved around the metal rod. Down below, to the right, branches of a tree swayed, letting out an eerie sound as the wind rushed through the leaves. Beyond the tree was nothing but the sky again. The river was wide and long.

The clouds moved fast on its surface, the stars twinkled and the moon smouldered. The dolphins, which jumped out of the river every now and then, glowed in the pale light of the

moon. Long, dark ropes appeared at the edges of my vision. They seemed to move in time with the leaves on the trees below.

“I am a fool, a complete fool. Why didn’t we talk more about when we’d meet again? And now he has sailed away into the deep, mysterious sea. Perhaps I’ll see him again. Perhaps not.” There was a long sigh.

Silence. And then another sigh.

Two doors opened into a sparsely but elegantly furnished room. There was a fireplace and above it a mirror; it was the same width as the fireplace and extended almost up to the ceiling. A woman stood in the mirror. Flanking her were red damask curtains, which hung from the pelmet above

the doors. She gazed at her reflection. Her long, black hair curled up into a bun high on her head; strands had escaped from the loosely tied bun, which she now tucked behind her ears. The mole above her lip was small and round, a tiny dot.

A gust of wind blew in from the open doors and the room was filled with the sound of fluttering. She looked around the room at the sheets of paper flying around and turned to shut the doors, but not before a few sheets of paper flew out of the room and into the dark. Then she ran to try and pick up the rest of the sheets strewn all over the floor.

She stopped to peruse a sheet of paper. There was something scribbled on it in vaguely familiar handwriting.

*Tempt me not to load my boat with debt,
but give me leave to go away empty-
handed,
lest the price of love that you recklessly
pay
should only reveal the poorness of my
heart...^{iv}*

It was signed at the bottom.

I saw her fingers trace the curves of the letters.

Her eyes began to close and the next thing I knew I was in total darkness. When her eyes

opened, there was light coming from the other end, the light of day. I saw bushes adorned with exotic flowers such as I had never seen before. A voice shouted a greeting and a man came into view. He was on a bicycle and carried a satchel on his back. He held a letter.

Long, honey-coloured fingers reached out for it and the envelope started shaking wildly. It became a blur and the next thing it was up in the air between some birds, which jumped out of the way in alarm. And then the envelope came into view again. It lay face down on the ground. The fingers reached out for it. The envelope trembled slightly before it was ripped open and a letter was pulled out.

It was getting late in the afternoon. Long shadows of the trees extended on the gravel path. The river came into view again, its tranquil waters flowing silently towards the sea.

A three storeyed French Victorian mansion, surrounded by giant palms, eucalyptus and araucaria pines rose ahead. It got closer and closer. A door opened into it.

The dark had seeped inside as well. Amorphous shapes floated in unlit corners. But the steps I heard were steady and spoke of someone who knew the place well. A lamp lit the far end of the corridor. We went towards it. There was a door on the right. Victoria pushed it and it opened onto a high-

ceilinged room with walls lined with book shelves. Near the window was a writing desk and chair. To the left, a huge fireplace sat unused: ashes lay where the fire must burn in the colder months.

She walked to the writing desk and chair. The river shimmered in the light of the street lamps, which had turned on as dusk had fallen on this land.

There was a creaking sound and the envelope came into view again. She drew out the letter from it.

Dear Victoria,

Do you remember that time when we walked along the river and came across a carcass lying on the grass? This morning I left the cabin to take a walk on the Ship's deck before sunrise. You said that the sun is beautiful when it emerges from your river each morning, but I can tell you that it is nothing when compared to the sight of the sun rising out of the expansive ocean.

Here the letter vanished from my sight and I saw the river through the window, and also Victoria.

Tears streamed out of her eyes and on to the letter on the desk, which floated into my line of sight. A blob formed here, another

there, the ink spreading out unevenly to form an aura around the words. They looked like the organic shapes that Tagore was fond of creating from his writing.

The page turned and I continued to read the rest of the letter:

When I got to the deck I saw some men throwing what looked like the remains of an animal off the ship and into the water. It turned out that the chef did not approve of the colour of the meat. Not that it would have bothered me because I don't eat meat, but it seemed like such a waste of a life. Or perhaps it is just that we look at animals from a perspective that is our own and has nothing to do with the way they might feel about

themselves. They live, they eat, they procreate and they die; sometimes for the pleasures of man sometimes not, but they die, like we all will too one day.

In that we are together, perspective or no perspective. But I do believe that when I die it will be a death that will not be futile for I know that I will have lived my days to the full.

Know that I have drunk the honey of the formless

from the lotus of endless forms;

in the bosom of sufferings I have found the secret path of delight;

Death, I accept not from thee that I am a gigantic jest of God...^v

The signature was in Bengali.

Victoria's reflection in the glass came into view again. Beyond the window pane was a suburban garden where a while ago the river had been. The plants in the garden stirred in the breeze. New buds were forming on the brown branches. I looked at the face in the glass, the blue eyes crinkled and the skin glowed from the light in the room.

She pushed back her chair and shuffled towards the door. It opened into a long corridor. There was a woman standing at its far end. I felt Victoria turn to look back into the room. She smiled. It was dark on the other side. The only light came from the

street lamps. A man and a woman walked on the footpath, hand in hand, as their children ran in front of them.

She closed the door.

The trees outside were swaying, men and women walked with their chins tucked into their chests, overcoats wrapped tightly against the onslaught of the wind. A little boy played with his ball as his father stood with his back to a building.

“Lady, I said this is the last stop.”

“Oh, sorry.”

As I walked off the bus the tennis ball hit me. I picked it up and handed it back to the

little boy who pulled a face at me when I ruffled his hair. I smiled, and walked away.

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ⁱ Rabindranath Tagore, "Atithi, reproduced in Ketaki Kushari Dyson, *In Your Blossoming Flower Garden* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988), 121

ⁱⁱ Rabindranath Tagore, poem xxvii, *Gitanjali*, (New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2002), 26

ⁱⁱⁱ Tagore's term for Baudelaire; he was introduced to his works by Ocampo, see Dyson.

^{iv} Rabindranath Tagore, "Ashanka", reproduced in Ketaki Kushari Dyson, *In Your Blossoming Flower Garden* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988), 135

^v Rabindranath Tagore, “Kankal”, reproduced in
Ketaki Kushari Dyson, *In Your Blossoming Flower Garden*
(New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988), 164

This short story was written for my Honours project in Visual Arts at the ANU School of Art, Canberra in 2008. I would like to thank my supervisor, Lucy Neave for all her guidance and support and for reading the endless versions of the story.

I also want to thank Alpana Vij, Rajiv Vij, Katy Bell, Meenakshi Mahajan, Tanya McCarthy, Tracy Sutherland and Ashley Thomson for their encouraging feedback on the story as it progressed.

I want to thank Caren Florance for her very generous and optimistic nature and for guiding me in the actual making of the book.

Lastly, I want to thank my husband Rajat and our three boys for being in my life. A little message for the boys here: I love you all, even when you fight.

Payal Sehgal Mahajan

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