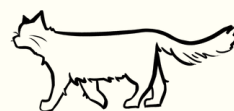


MONOGRAPH



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Ritobrita Mukherjee

Editor-in-Chief

In the list of the most universal of experiences, finding community around a table while breaking bread together perhaps ranks higher than most. There is humility, love, gratitude, and acceptance speeding down our gullets even as we deny our bodies the time to truly experience the somatic pleasures of a slow swallow or an extremely loud, public belch.



In the October Issue, Monograph turns to the table, and to the emotions that propel our minds to give more thought to what our death-row meals would be than we let on.



in lieu of a poem, I'd like to say

(after Danez Smith)

Chetan Ashish

ice apples in the hands of my grandfather- digging into their flesh, his fingers look like a child's, what would we look like in the wild? the first time someone dried prawns, a small god appeared, but surely hunger came before. there is no greater fear than forgetting and so I try to remember- I can hardly get past the first time I skinned my knee, let alone a previous life or that of my ancestors' to see what sins we committed. the broken trees that continue to grow, giving birth to roots that find a kinder ground. to share with someone how small the city is in the dead of night with no cars, you can follow where the waterways and the forests once flowed. and oh, the stars. my grandfather now chews on palmyra sprouts, does he realise that he was chased and whipped with the fronds of the same plant in his youth? why do we seek joy and truth in all the things that hurt us? does pain always take the form of a river that will find us again years later? he looks at me and for a moment, he is a boy and the light outside is green. he says in a shifting tongue "it is possible for bondage and freedom to grow from the same seed". it is possible I said this to myself but the ice apples are real, so are the sprouts and the small kindness of this day my grandfather exchanged his body for, and the ones still to come, the roads to which we have to build.



With Patchwork

A.J. Huffman

buttons

down

my

back,

I have forgotten the basic
comforts of sitting, stretching,

leaning. I am
displaced by my outer
not-quite-shell-like covering.

Peel me,
please. Save me
from myself.



Collecting shells is illegal

Stella Kexagioglou





Stella Kexagioglou



Figs Belong in the Luxury Class

Ohsoon Yun

Whenever I buy fruit, I spend an unreasonable amount of time thinking about how to cut it. The same fruit can look completely different depending on where the knife goes, and somehow that changes how delicious it seems. This does not mean that I cut fruit beautifully. Quite the opposite. I like to hold it in my hand and chop it rather roughly. Fruit looks more like fruit that way. When every piece is trimmed into the same precise shape, it can start to look like plastic fruit from a shop display. I prefer pieces that are slightly different in size and shape. They make me feel, however irrationally, that I have just picked the fruit and am eating it on the spot.

Do you like figs? I love them. But the first time I bought figs by myself as an adult and had to cut one open, I was strangely nervous. Until then, I had eaten figs my mother had cut for me, or figs that arrived already sliced on a plate. I knew perfectly well how to eat one. I had simply never been the person holding the knife. Should I cut it in half and then into quarters? Should I just hold it and chop? I began by cutting off the little stem at the top because, for no scientific reason, it looked like the part least likely to taste good. A white, milky liquid immediately appeared at the cut. I froze. Would this stuff never come off my hands? I had already been slightly intimidated by the fig before I touched it. Now the fig was leaking white latex at me.



Later I learned that figs do indeed produce a milky latex. The rubber plant I had vaguely associated it with was not such an absurd connection either: *Ficus elastica*, the familiar rubber plant, belongs to the same genus as the common fig. Fig latex can also irritate the skin, so washing it off is sensible. I placed the knife carefully at the centre of the fig and cut straight through. Oh. Inside was a world I had not expected. The outside of a fig is a dark, bluish purple, a little like aubergine skin, with a patch of green around the stem. Its shape even reminds me slightly of a whole bulb of garlic. Nothing about this modest, dark exterior prepares you for what appears when you split it open: pale flesh surrounding a crowded, intricate centre of pink and red, so delicate that it looks as if a firm touch could bruise the entire thing. I stared at it for a while. Then I ate the whole plate. It was delicious.



There was another occasion on which I discovered figs for the first time. This one involved the English language. I did not learn the word “fig” from a dictionary. I learned it through a prolonged misunderstanding with a German friend. After moving to another European country, he called me with an update about his new life and proudly told me that he finally had a “fig” at home. I heard “pig”. I wondered why anyone would keep a pig at home when pork was readily available from a butcher. Something about the conversation did not quite fit, but I continued under the assumption that my friend had entered a new and unexpectedly agricultural stage of life.



Then he said he was thinking of making jam from it. I knew about German sausages. Pig jam was new territory. “What do you eat that jam with?” I asked. “Yoghurt. It’s really good with yoghurt. And on bread. Maybe I’ll have it with coffee.” I began to reassess everything I thought I knew about European food culture. After the call, I searched the internet for pork jam. To my astonishment, such a thing existed: bacon jam, cooked down with onions, sugar and other ingredients. So although I had misheard him, I had not arrived in a completely imaginary culinary universe.



Some time later, my friend sent me a photograph and announced that he had harvested his “pig”. Harvested? Pigs were harvested now? In the photograph, several dark fruits had been carefully arranged on the floor. At last I understood. My friend had not been raising a pig. He had been growing figs. Korean speakers are often teased about confusing L and R in English. I had apparently developed a more personal problem involving P and F. I told him, “You know, when you said pig, I thought you were raising a pig and planning to make jam out of it. I even wondered whether I should stop hanging out with you.”

I like almost every fruit, but figs occupy a special place in a completely unofficial ranking system that exists only in my head. Figs are not merely premium. They belong in the luxury class. Pomegranates and blood oranges sit nearby. A ripe fig at the end of summer with cold, thick yoghurt is one of those combinations I do not want to explain. If someone asks me what it tastes like, I would prefer to remain silent. Please. Choose your questions more carefully.

When I lived in Korea, fig season meant buying a large box, perhaps twenty at a time, and keeping them in the refrigerator.



When the season ended, I moved on to fig jam. In Japan, where I now live, I often eat it on soft bread. Late August and early September are the weeks when figs begin appearing everywhere in fruit sections in both Korea and Japan. One morning recently, I went to a small farmers' market near my home in Tokyo. There was one packet of figs left. Three figs. Japan often seems determined to sell fruit and vegetables in quantities that require emotional adjustment from a Korean shopper. Nearby, a single bulb of garlic was priced at 390 yen. As someone who used to put an entire bulb of garlic into one pasta dish, I could not bring myself to buy it. I wept a little internally and placed the three figs in my basket instead.

Back home, I chopped them with considerably more confidence than I had possessed during my first encounter and put them in a bowl with Greek yoghurt. I am no longer afraid of cutting figs. Still, I remember that first moment of hesitation, and I remember the shock of seeing the pale pink world inside. It was too beautiful to forget.



The Korean and Japanese names for the fig are written with Chinese characters that literally suggest a “fruit without flowers”. But a fig is not flowerless at all. What we casually call the fruit is a remarkable structure, a syconium, lined on the inside with tiny flowers. What looks from the outside like a single fruit is, botanically, a small hidden community. So on that first day, when I cut a fig in half and stared at its crowded interior, I was not simply looking at flesh and seeds. I had opened something closer to an inward-facing flower garden.

They have grown across the eastern Mediterranean and western Asia for millennia. Archaeological finds from the Lower Jordan Valley, dating to roughly 11,400 to 11,200 years ago, have even been interpreted by some researchers as evidence that people may have been intentionally propagating figs very early in the Neolithic period, although that interpretation remains debated. Whatever the exact beginning, figs have been travelling with people for a very long time. And after that long journey, three of them passed through a small farmers’ market in Tokyo and arrived in my dessert bowl.

Figs are old travelling companions of humans. Their history cannot be assigned neatly to one modern country.



I spooned Greek yoghurt over them. The little spoon I used had Moomin on it, a character born in Finland. I looked at the bowl and felt that something was missing. Perhaps because I have spent twenty years researching Ethiopian coffee, Ethiopia has a habit of appearing in my thoughts whenever I taste something. I knew what the bowl needed: Ethiopian honey. A spoonful would have made it perfect.

I had, in fact, done nothing more remarkable that morning than buy three figs and eat them. Yet my small bowl had somehow accumulated a route stretching from western Asia to Japan, a German friend's imaginary pig, yoghurt carrying the name of Greece, a Finnish Moomin, and Ethiopian honey that was not even physically there. This is one reason I like food. A plate rarely stays in one place if you look at it long enough.

I have discovered the fig twice. The first time was when I learned that my friend had said fig, not pig. The second was when I cut one open and discovered that the fruit I thought I knew had been keeping its flowers on the inside.



Somewhere Over The Woods

Eugenia Smirnova





Red Treats

Evgenia Smirnova



topiia

SZ. Hallern

The key change happened and in we went.
Open church doors don't guarantee salvation.
Tell me, are those hopes and prayers tautological?
Event horizons exist for all events... all horizons.

Let me know when the chiming stops.

Humans created pockets - they allow for baggage.
Still, it's impossible to pick up and put in more than you put
down when you're let down, slowly.
You release everything you ever hold; much to keeping hold's
chagrin, letting go is made itself of time.
Roots can't keep their fruits too long lest they rot.

A home too well-lived in, won't be for long.
Outgrown this agreement between father and son.



We feel altogether more responsible for the seedlings on our sills than those that sit outside. We dictate the viability thereof.

Succulents, to survive, need ~5 millilitres of water, per day, on average, whereas the forests need much, much more.

Wild cats eat of their own accord, but if they don't, they die.

Pets never knew any different nor any better.

Move a beehive less than 3 feet, more than 3 miles, or not at all – otherwise, the things don't stay where you put them.

Fresh, breath-worthy air, exists now in pockets.

River runs desperately, desperately, not to dry out and up.

Sand sees sun again, for the first time in a while unrefracted.

An however-decreasing latency between lives half-lived, dreams half-slept, and things half-done, still never quite fully chases the delay away.

Don't get out of bed until you've dreamt.

Carry on, keep making the mistake so you've never made it.

If every time we took and got, we gave, we'd sooner go without than disappear.

More is wasted than needed; more forgotten than learnt.

It's never been hotter.

The memories still burn.



Pray beneath a cloud for it to rain.

Plant your suckers next to your fixers and: nitrify.

A cycle with a start point's a spiral.

Turn stones but leave no tracks, for we mayn't like the reflection, if we find our way back.

Some things, in fact, were precisely built not to last.

What's the difference between place and space?

I don't want to go back.

Wherever you go, make sure to take yourself with you.

Please don't make me go back.

Not even reflexes, reactions aren't automatic.

Concentrate: nutrients – against – gradient – active transport – pull in – from the roots.

Without creating matter, all that can be done is to move scarcity around, or let it diffuse from here to there and back again.

No matter how many times sun-sucked-up, the rain drops again.

A spiral.



Beliefs enshrine themselves physically, as a matter of fact – as
a matter of fact – as a matter of matter.

Unbelieved faiths capitulate to consumption, eaten away,
digested by the absence of veritability they once ardently
advocated for.

All are allowed to be married to their vows.

Thought oughtn't need a second self or opinion; brainstorm
gurgitate domicile dominion.

Most town halls aren't tangible now, and if they are, they
aren't there anymore.

Raise a dispute; write a ticket; forget your tip and digits
whilst you wait.

Rules go from in to out, boundaries out to in, fences: stay
there.

Without a worthy journey, an end-point might not be.

What did you come here through, not for.

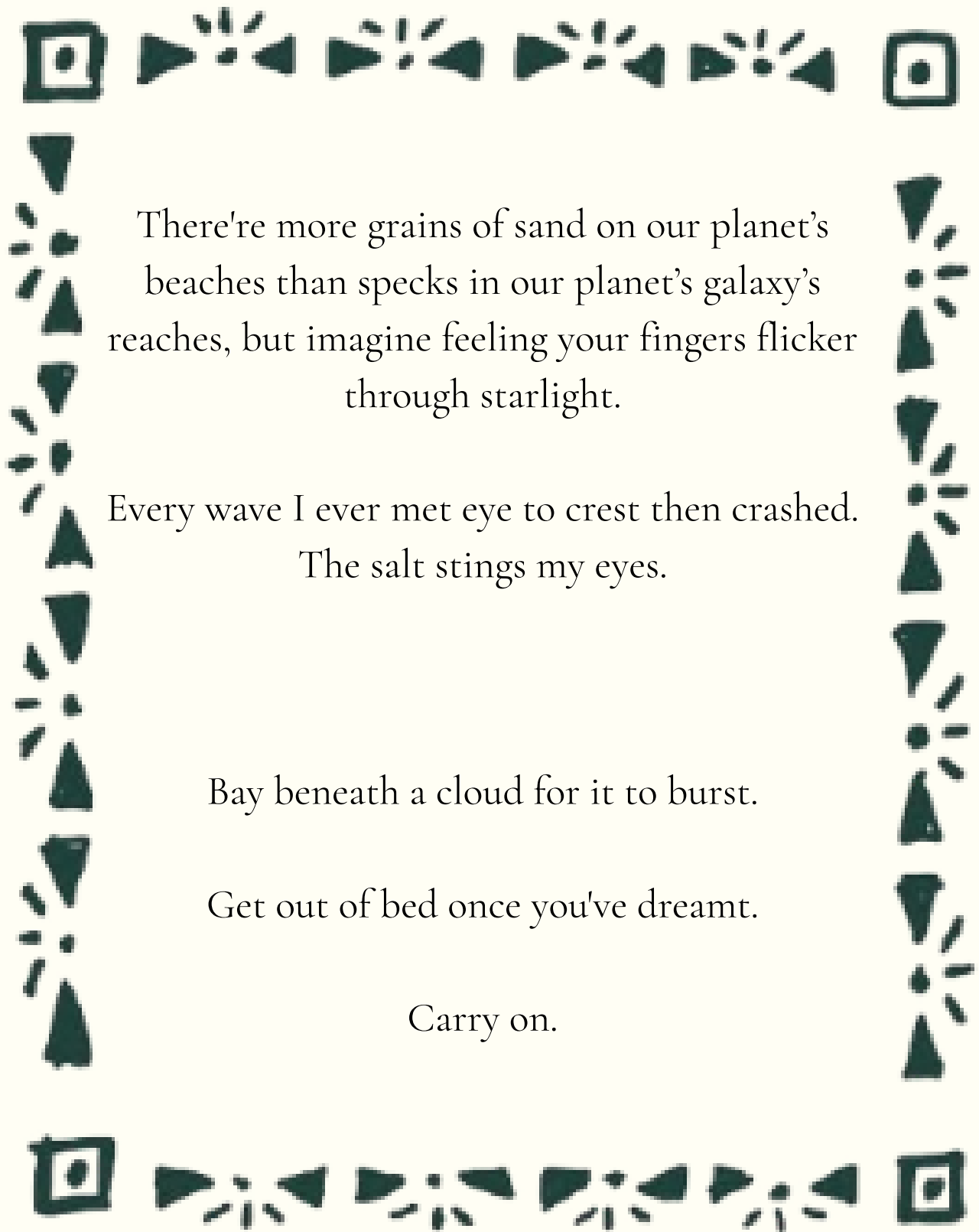
How beautiful.

Pose, I'd only just got that shot lined up.

Sat on the shoulders of giants, I hate these views.

If we truly aren't the animals, why then the zoos?





There're more grains of sand on our planet's
beaches than specks in our planet's galaxy's
reaches, but imagine feeling your fingers flicker
through starlight.

Every wave I ever met eye to crest then crashed.
The salt stings my eyes.

Bay beneath a cloud for it to burst.

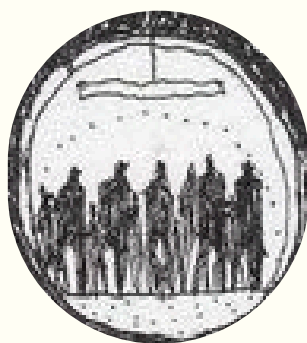
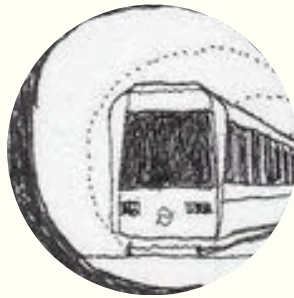
Get out of bed once you've dreamt.

Carry on.



Bus

Tim Boardman



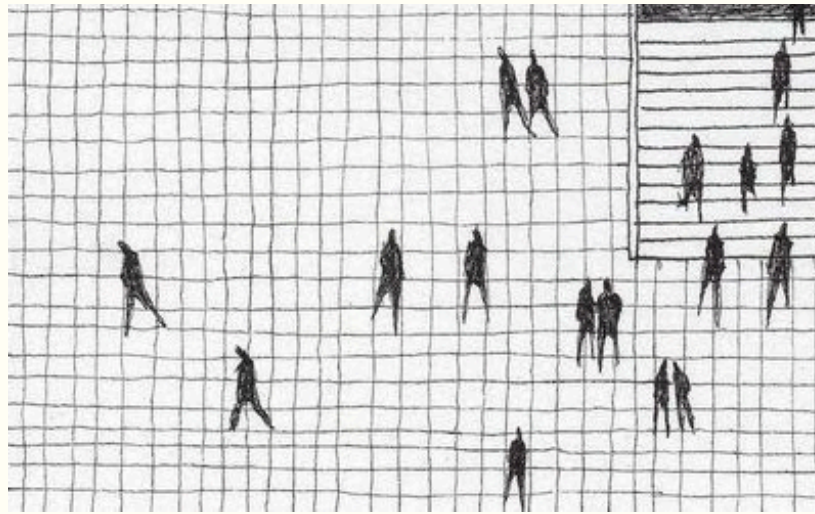
I'm on
the top deck
of a double-decker
bus
Sitting
front right
pretending
to drive
Cyclists look
vulnerable
from up here
I'm never cycling
again
Car drivers
sticking the noses
of their cars
out of crossroads
The gentleman
beside me
is going to a
bereavement meeting
He misses his wife
every day



How long have you
been going?
I ask

“Two years,”
he replies
Silence
between us
I’ve read up
about it

Any conclusions?
“Well,” he says,
“Page one hundred
could just say
‘Life is too short.’”



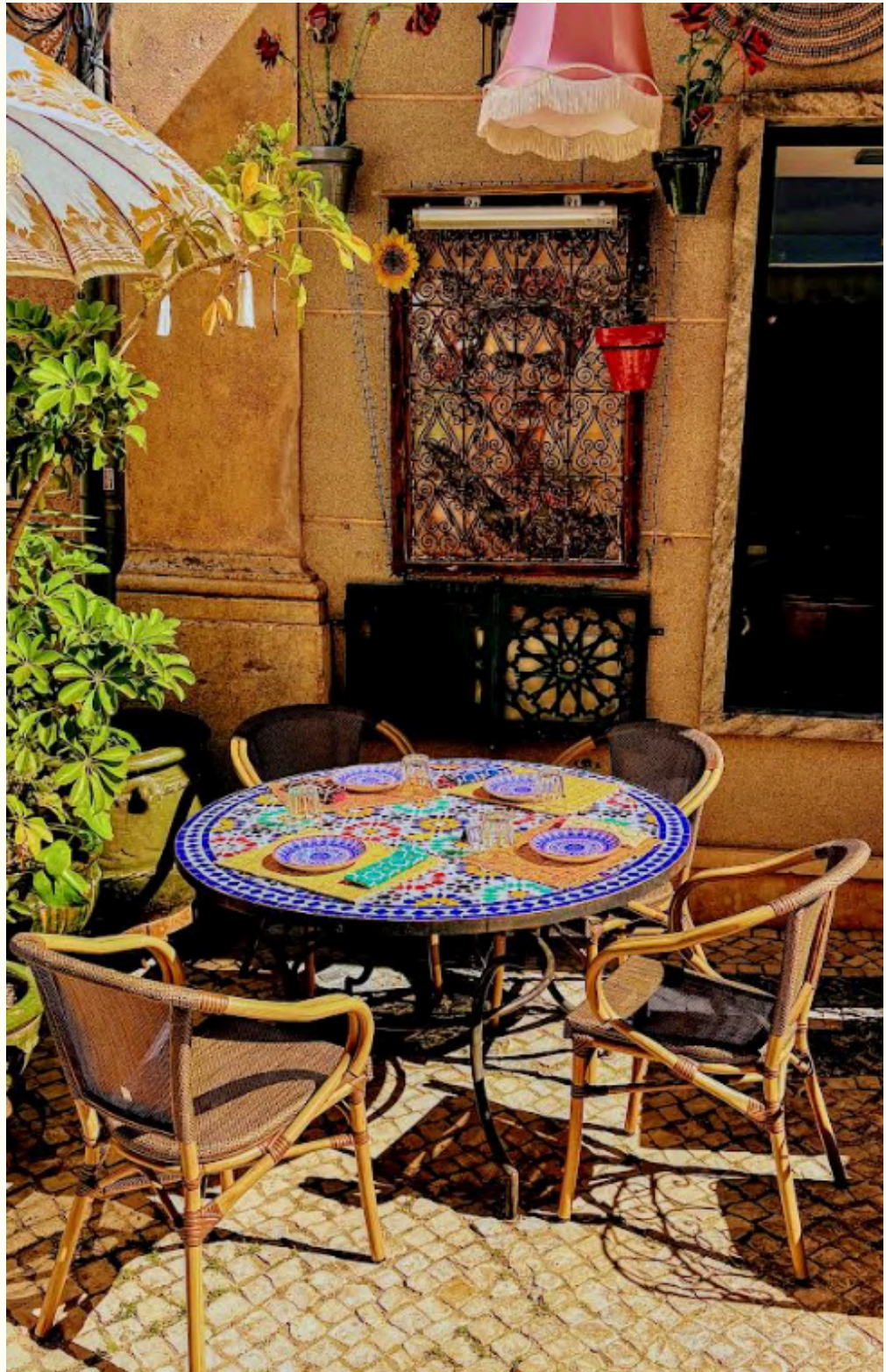
We laugh
and silently cry
Have you noticed
the shape of trees
on bus routes?

I used to think
that’s how they grew
But as the top deck
hits a branch
I realise
not



A Table in the Sun for Two, Spain

Michael Watz



Intimate Geographies: Food, Faith, and Belonging in an Urban Ghetto in Delhi

Madhubanti Talukdar

In February 2021, I moved to Delhi as a Research Assistant at Jamia Millia Islamia. I took up residence in a women's Paying Guest (PG) facility in Jamia Nagar, in a low-income neighbourhood called Okhla Vihar, minutes away from the illustrious Shaheen Bagh. One of the primary sites of the anti-NRC anti-CAA movements of 2019-2020, Shaheen Bagh had by then been stripped of all its extraordinariness, the erasure of its short-lived revolutionary past absolute.

Lying on the South-eastern fringe of Delhi, Okhla Vihar and Shaheen Bagh are two of the many Muslim 'ghettos' bordering the polluted Yamuna River, populated largely by migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam, and Bengal – settlements that grew in tandem with increasing instances of violence and intimidation of Muslims in India since the Babri Masjid demolition. My time in this neighbourhood – marked by joy and agony in equal measure – was indicative of the intimate relationship between food and the experience of urban spaces, while unsettling long-held assumptions about power, privilege, marginality, and belonging.



What was it like – for an upper-caste, middle-class, Bengali Hindu woman raised in a ‘posh’ locality of one of the major metropolitan cities in India – to suddenly find myself in a space where I was an outsider in more ways than one? It unnerved me. It is one thing to visit such places as a tourist on a ‘food-walk’ or a student extending ‘solidarity’ during protest movements, but entirely another to live in it – to learn to contend with the dirt, dust and pollution; the incessant noise; the open drains; and the complete absence of sunlight and greenery – and more so as a Hindu woman, where my identity, if not suspect, was always the proverbial elephant in the room.

The sensory experience of the spaces that we live and move through structures our relationships with them. It shapes how we inhabit, navigate, and negotiate space, stepping beyond instrumental logic or the diktats of Google Maps. I used to walk to my workplace every day, making sure to follow the little sunlight that graced the cramped alleyways of Okhla Vihar, even in peak Delhi heat. Instead of taking a ten-minute walk by a massive garbage dump where cows, buffaloes and a host of cattle egrets grazed together, I took a much longer route to the university – one lined with houses covered in bougainvillea blossoms. In the evenings, in search of respite, I would go up to the sliver of rooftop that my PG offered, taking in the rows of closely packed buildings with their bright lights and peeling paint, women in their balconies, men flying kites against a grey sky.



It took me a long time to get used to the crowd, the noise, and the crumbling roads with their disorderly traffic, and in my second month there, a wayward rickshaw went over my foot, uprooting a toenail – causing excruciating pain. For someone who had taken clean air and birdcalls and silence for granted growing up, life had suddenly been bared down to its skeleton, gaping at me with its cruel wide jaws, threatening to engulf me whole.

I began living in Okhla Vihar because it was the only place I could afford back then, but by the time I left, a year later, I was blinking back tears, the lump in my throat making it hard to say goodbye. What had changed? Everything. What had brought about that change? Oddly enough, it was food. Food shaped my relationship to Okhla Vihar in a substantial way, mediating difference, offering solace, and allowing me to experience a Delhi that few belonging to my social location could possibly imagine. What was once a marker of my symbolic otherness in Okhla Vihar became, in time, a vehicle to forge bonds of trust and intimacy with those around me.



In the beginning, my dietary habits aroused doubt and confusion. I was a Hindu who ate pork – strictly forbidden in Islam – but I was also a Hindu who ate beef. I carried no markers of religion either on my body or in my room – other than my name, which when mentioned, drew looks of surprise from those around me. “But you don’t look like a Hindu” – they said. “What do Hindus look like?” – I would laugh. It was a curious turning-of-the-tables – being labelled, categorized, and stereotyped as Muslims in my country usually are – my identity suddenly putting me under a spotlight that I would do anything to escape. I remember the sense of acute self-consciousness that accompanied me whenever I stepped out during those early days – a persistent feeling of being watched, my senses heightened, my uncovered hair clinging guiltily to the back of my neck. I envied the many Muslim women around me, occupying public space effortlessly, at ease with their bodies and themselves.

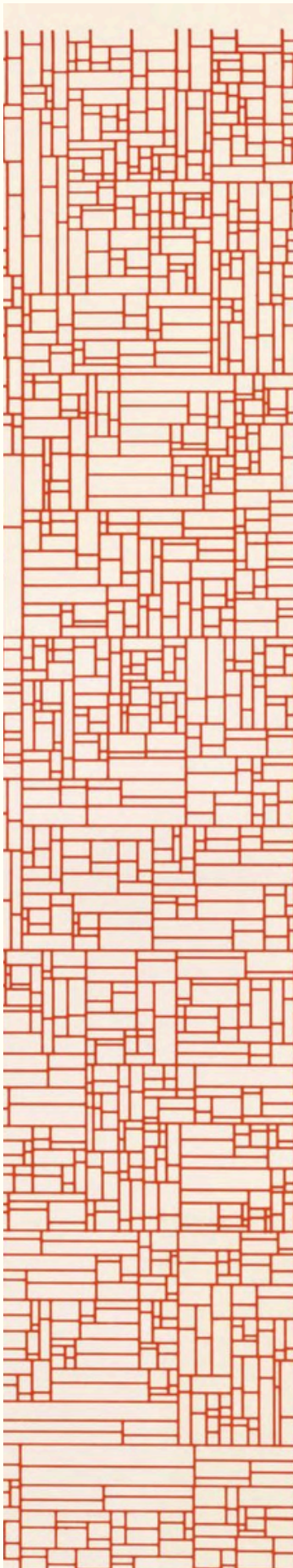
Things began to change when Resham didi, a woman who had battled many hardships in life, came to occupy the room next to mine. From the very beginning she took a liking to me, calling me into her room and offering me bits of food, and finally asking me to have dinner with her. Soon, we began sharing our meals, even eating from the same plate. This shocked Fatima, another resident, who warned Resham didi that her namaaz would never be accepted since she was sharing her plate with a Hindu, especially someone who was known to consume ‘that-which-cannot-be-spoken-of’.



To my surprise, Resham didi simply responded with – I love her, and that is all I know. As for the rest, Allah knows best. It was that simple utterance, an act not only of quiet kindness but of immense courage, from an almost-stranger, that began, gradually, to transform a hostile, alien place into one of comfort, camaraderie, and solidarity.

This incident opened up a door of possibilities. By the time Resham didi moved out, I had managed to make a place for myself not only in my PG but also the neighbourhood at large. I now knew most of the shopkeepers around our building, who would greet me with the customary ‘Assalaamalaikum’ every time they saw me. I grew especially fond of Uncle, the owner of ‘Urban Bazaar’ – a departmental store on the floor right beneath ours, who would give me extra eggs for free and hold my packages for me if I returned home late. In the PG, the other girls and I would often strike up conversations in the kitchen, about family, work, and romantic troubles, battling shared concerns of no water-no electricity-loudspeakers affecting studies-toilets not being cleaned. We shared food, and recipes, and went out to eat at the many small restaurants in the area, serving delicious kebabs, shawarma, and hot plates of biriyani at throwaway prices. We each had our favourites, and took turns in eating at them, celebrating holidays and birthdays and small victories at work.



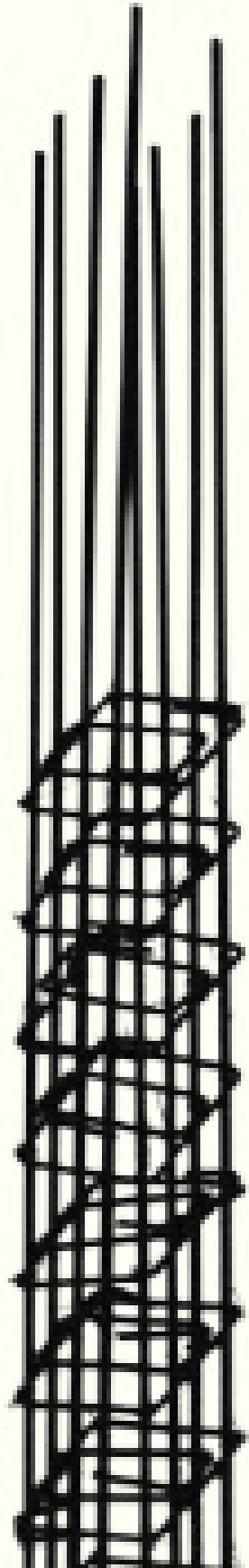


Soon came Ramazan – a time when Okhla Vihar would be fasting – bringing with it concerns about how I would manage my lunch. The tiffin service that I got my meals from would be closed during the day, serving only dinner. Moreover, all the women in my PG would be waking up to have sehri before sunrise, and break their bread at iftaar together – and I would, of course, remain excluded from it all. Or so I believed. Two days before Ramazan, the owner of the tiffin service – a Bengali aunty from Siliguri – called to inform me that she would re-heat a portion of the sehri meal prepared at dawn and send it over to me for lunch. Seeing as I was her only Hindu customer, her consideration overwhelmed me. Ramazan brought other treats as well, in the form of iftaar invitations, free meals from the mosque next door, and a temporary mutton momo stall near our residence that we frequented together. Food – and shared rituals around preparing, buying, and consuming it – became the great leveller – with even Fatima asking me to join her for dinner one day.



In a matter of months, Okhla Vihar became familiar – its streets, buildings, mosques, salons, and eateries known to me, no longer confronting me as the ‘other-outsider’, but accepting of my gait, my gaze, and my gaiety. Its pothole-ridden streets, its air heavy with the smell of food and the voices of people, and its loud, whirring motorbikes in the dead of the night no longer bothered me as much. We no longer merely tolerated each other.

The many acts of kindness that marked my remaining months in that neighbourhood taught me how life in these ghettos – despite neglect, institutional apathy, and systemic discrimination – persists, even thrives, owing to everyday practices of care, reciprocity, and coexistence. My time in Okhla Vihar forced me to unlearn and interrogate much of what I thought I knew about cities and the people who inhabit their margins, enabling me to see beyond the brick-and-mortar space, and to map its everyday ordinariness with my own meanings, practices, experiences, and memories.





Cosmic Trilogy

Simran KS Lamba





Familial Conversations

Simran KS Lamba



The Thali I Thought I Knew

Mugdha Saikia

As a kid, I used to think Assamese food was represented well by an Assamese thali in restaurants.

I don't anymore.

The Assamese meal I remember most clearly was never arranged like a thali. It was rice, fish cooked with dhunduli khar, some bhendi bhaji and white til chutney. There was no attempt to make the plate look abundant. No small bowls arranged symmetrically, no assortment meant to demonstrate everything Assamese cuisine could possibly contain. It was simply lunch.

I remember being at home with my grandparents. I remember the smell before I remember the taste. The sharpness of khar, the nuttiness of white sesame, fish fried in mustard oil and cooking in the kitchen. I remember sitting down to eat and beginning, as I usually did, with rice and khar. I had cooked it myself and served it. At the time, I did not think I was eating culture. I was just eating lunch.

Now that distinction has become increasingly difficult for me to ignore.



The first time I began to feel something was strange about the Assamese thali served in restaurants was when I saw khar sitting beside a tangy tomato and lau fish curry. My immediate reaction was almost physical: these things do not belong together.

It wasn't that either dish was unfamiliar. Both were familiar. It was the combination that felt wrong.

An Assamese meal, at least the one I knew, had a rhythm to it. Some things were seasonal. Some appeared once a week. Some belonged to particular seasons. Khar and sour/tangy preparations did not necessarily arrive together simply because both could be described as Assamese. A meal was not a catalog of everything the kitchen knew how to make. The restaurant thali seemed to ask a different question:

How much Assamese food can we put on one plate? And perhaps that is where the plate changes.

The thali makes Assamese food legible. It gathers dishes that might otherwise belong to different days, seasons, households and habits and places them together so that someone can look at the plate and immediately recognize it as Assamese. Everyday food becomes a representation of Assamese food. Ordinary food becomes something to be presented. Seasonal food becomes available all year. Heritage becomes something one can order. I don't think this makes the restaurant thali fake. It makes it a particular kind of object.



It is Assamese food translated into a form that can be recognized, consumed and sold as Assamese culture. And once I began thinking about the plate this way, I started noticing how much of what makes a meal possible is absent from it. There is, for instance, the person who made it.

In my experience, men often had a say in what would be cooked and were more likely to buy the ingredients. Women were the ones who cleaned, cut, cooked, served, remembered everyone's preferences, adjusted recipes when something was unavailable, packed leftovers, made tea and learned the recipes from older women. Women knew the food. That did not necessarily mean that women had authority over food. These are not the same thing.



The kitchen could be a place where knowledge accumulated without power necessarily following it. A woman might know exactly how someone in the family liked their fish, how much salt an elder would tolerate, which vegetables needed to be cooked first, how a particular preparation changed with the season, and which ingredient could replace another when the right one wasn't available. Yet the authority to decide what the household would eat could still belong elsewhere.



Marriage could deepen this inheritance. Becoming a daughter-in-law often meant entering an already existing food system. You learned who liked what. Who was served first. Who got the best piece of fish. Who could say they didn't want something. Who was expected to eat whatever had been prepared. In many households, men were served first and given the better piece of fish or meat. Women would find themselves eating later and receiving the fish head or whatever remained. A meal can therefore look ordinary while containing a very precise arrangement of gender. The plate doesn't show any of this. Neither does it show the garden.

When I was a child, my grandmother maintained our bari back in Tezpur — the kitchen garden. It contained vegetables, fruits, herbs and other plants that were part of everyday cooking. Until around 2010, my grandparents barely needed to buy vegetables because so much of what we ate came from there.

My grandmother decided what to plant. She knew when things were ready to harvest. She knew what could be cooked and how.



When I was living in Guwahati with my parents, my grandparents would sometimes visit. My grandfather and grandmother would arrive with an entire suitcase filled with vegetables and fruits from the bari. I think about that suitcase often. It was not food delivery. It was not a curated box of 'traditional Assamese produce'. It was simply my grandfather bringing home what my grandmother had grown. That suitcase contained an entire food system: land, cultivation, labour, knowledge, seasonality, memory and care. By the time the vegetables reached our kitchen, most of that labour had become invisible.

Over time, the bari became less central to our food life. We began buying more vegetables. Ingredients became things to be purchased in colourful packets from supermarkets rather than things we expected to find growing at home. Space changed. Time changed. Work changed. Food became increasingly dependent on markets. This isn't necessarily a story about decline. I don't think every change in food should be mourned as cultural loss. My own plate has changed too.

As a child, I mostly remember eating chicken and rice. Now my meals include more xaak, lau, jika, khar, khorisa and freshwater fishes that I once paid less attention to. The change has not simply been caused by availability. It has also been caused by the way I learned to look at food.



Studying and critical thinking changed a lot of that. It made me suspicious of categories that had once felt natural. For a long time, fermented bamboo shoot and dried fish could feel embarrassing to me as a kid — food that belonged to a category of things that were somehow lowly — as I had been taught. At the same time, oats and sandwiches could carry the opposite association: modern, healthy and sophisticated.

Eventually I realized that neither category was natural. They had been taught. What counted as respectable food had to do with caste, gender and class about what a modern person should eat. What counted as dirty or backward could be equally social. Food was not something I consumed. It was also teaching me how society worked.

And then there is jolpaan. I remember it as breakfast: something made at home, part of the ordinary rhythm of the day. Today, the word can also appear on packaging, menus and products marketed as Assamese traditional food. Something happens when that transition occurs. A food that was once simply eaten becomes heritage. Heritage becomes something that can be displayed. And what can be displayed can be sold.

I find this transformation fascinating because it does not require the food itself to disappear. In fact, the opposite can happen. A food can become more visible at precisely the moment it becomes less ordinary.



The same thing happens to the Assamese meal. The restaurant thali does not necessarily invent the food on it. What it does is gather, arrange and present it. It takes food that once belonged to households, seasons and particular contexts and gives it a recognizable form. It makes the cuisine easier to see. But perhaps in making it easier to see, something becomes harder to see. The woman who grew the vegetables. The woman who learned whose preferences mattered. The child who was told to eat one more serving. The person who ate the fish head because somebody else got the best piece. The season in which one ingredient was available and another was not. The family that stopped maintaining its bari. The recipe that changed because the original ingredient became expensive or unavailable. The grandfather who arrived with a suitcase full of vegetables. These are also Assamese foods. They simply don't fit neatly on a thali.

I think this is why my grandmother would probably look at my current plate and find very little strange about it. She would recognize the lau. She would recognize the jika. She would recognize the xaak. She might wonder why I am eating something in a particular combination, but she would not need a restaurant menu to tell her that the food was Assamese.



The continuity is there. What has changed is the way I understand it. I once thought food represented culture. Now I think food is one of the places where culture is made, negotiated and sometimes packaged. An Assamese meal is not a fixed collection of dishes. It is a relationship between season, ingredient, household, labour, memory and the people who know how those things fit together.

The restaurant thali gives that relationship a plate. It makes it visible. It makes it recognizable. It makes it purchasable. But the plate I grew up with was never only a plate. It was a kitchen where someone knew what to cook. It was a garden where someone knew what to grow. It was a woman who knew how everyone liked their food. It was a grandmother sending vegetables across the state in a suitcase. It was a child learning, slowly and almost accidentally, what counted as good food, bad food, respectable food, embarrassing food, festive food and ordinary food. And it was also a way of learning who gets to decide.

I did not begin studying food because I wanted to learn my own lunch. But somewhere between sociology, memory and growing older, I began to realize that my thaal had been teaching me all along. The plate did not become political when I learned how to see it. I simply learned how to see the politics that had always been there.



Pot Roast

Malaika Rai

To make a pot roast,
You must have meat
Premium cuts, bruised and supple.
Chest, thighs, and limbs
That can wrap around the neck
And hold the heat of the hearth.

To make a pot roast,
You must stay prepared
An apple wedged between the teeth,
Legs drawn tight against the cage of the ribs,
Stay spread open for the seasoning.
Blink twice,
But keep the throat silent.
No sound should escape the meat.



Learn to accept the salt,
The dry rub of indifference
Worked deep into the skin.
A nervous heart thins the blood
And no one wants a watery broth.
You must not let the juices flow
Stay tender for the knife,
Stay hollow for the feast.



To make a pot roast,
Don a pretty skirt and sit
Still, smiling, feet tucked beneath.
For no one likes a weeping meal.
Fear spoils the meat.



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