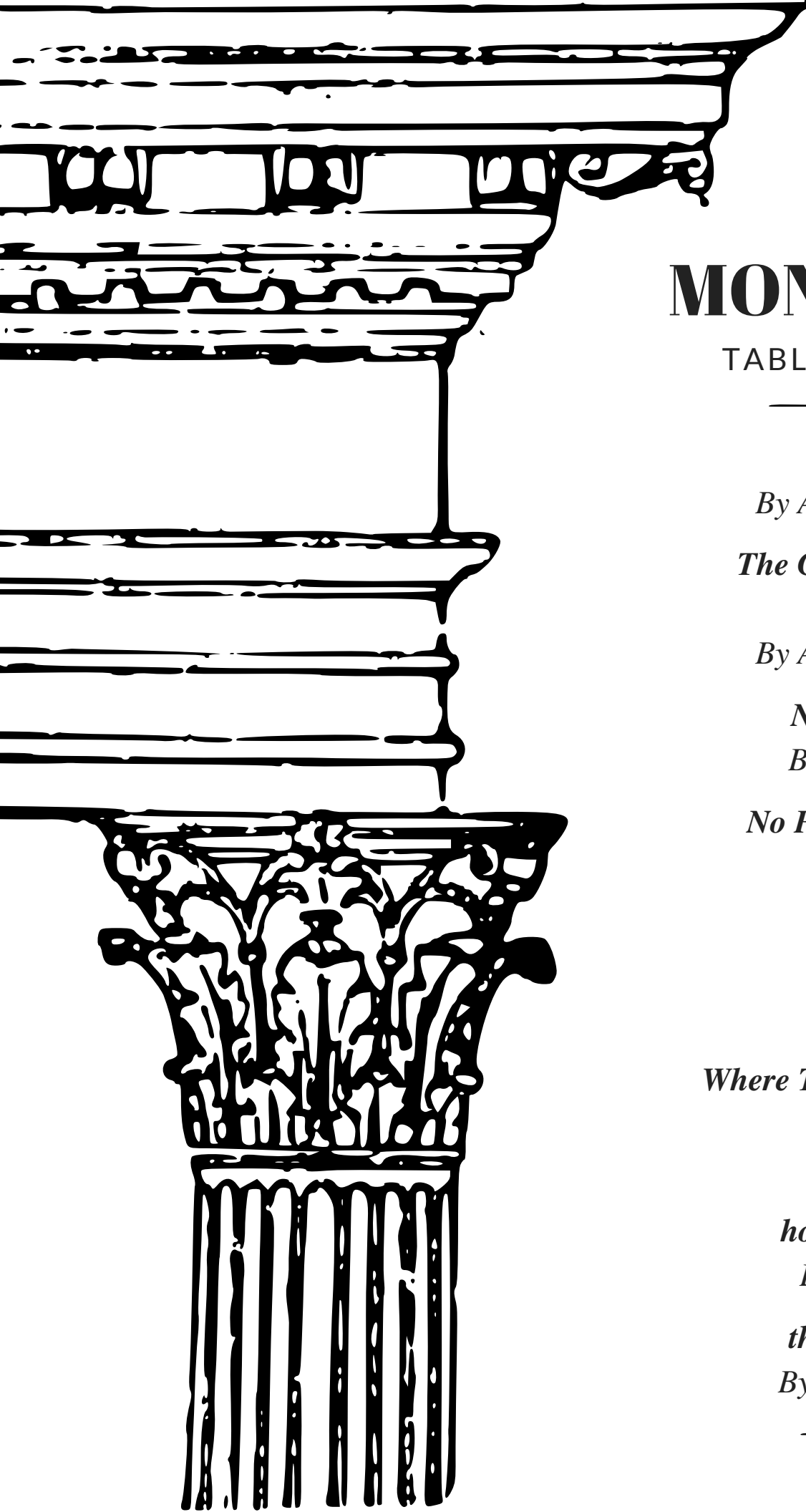


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MONOGRAPH

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Editor's Note



I hope this note finds you in good health. This year has seen us attempt a lot of new things, and not only am I proud of all my team members, but also exceedingly grateful to everyone who has played a part in getting us here. This issue is a wonderful amalgamation of all things Monograph, and I hope you enjoy it as much as we have in curating, researching and editing it.

Anuraag Das Sarma
Editor-In-Chief
Monograph





The Grand Houses of North Calcutta



ANURAAG DAS SARMA

The city began as Calcutta, cradled gently by the tempestuous Hooghly. The river wasn't shallow then, nor as muddy. The global networks forged on these waters led to the creation of the Strand, and the city, found originally as a trading settlement, slowly took architectural shape.

It wasn't built in a day, though the form it has taken in recent years might point towards it. No, the city, from its very beginning, was an unplanned, chaotic, landscape. A pandemonium of gargantuan proportions, a mix of smells and fragrances, of noise and music, of syncopated rhythms that pulsed through the roads as horses galloped by. It was never planned, no care given to where the manors went, and where the bustees. There was a white part of town, with cobbled streets, and well maintained drainage. That is as far as planning could get you in the swamps of Calcutta.

White town is still well maintained and a trip to Dalhousie Square is sure to impress upon you the fleeting grandeur of a stagnating city. The Black part of town however paints a bitter picture.

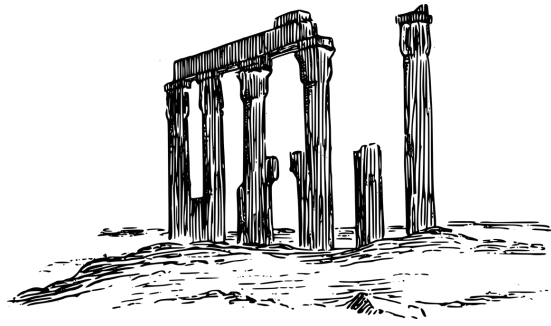
Further north, the car jitters. Narrow alleys, habitually filled with people, tell different stories. It is here that you find Calcutta shedding her metropolitan skin. A stone's throw from Dalhousie is Tiretti Bazaar. Often dubbed "Old Chinatown", it houses within it an ageing, yet important community. The lanes are dotted with fascinating islamic stucco work, and Nam Soon Church, at the end of Damzen lane, is breath-taking - a bewitching Indo-Chinese Taoist church that captivates the senses, and leaves you speechless.

The red mixes beautifully with the gold and has since 1820. The big gate, with emboldened calligraphy, combined with the red and green wooden doors make the place easier to spot, compared to the six other Chinese churches in the area. It is meant for visitors, yet is almost embarrassingly deserted. The reason still confounds me, perhaps if they had a social media presence.

A right, a right, and a left brings us back out on Central Ave. and the car can be booted up again. Step in, says Harry, before deftly manoeuvring the car out of the claustrophobic parking spot. The engine hums, and we are on our way.

The average North Calcutta mansion carries with it a major distinction compared to the European style manors of Dalhousie. And while the common answer might seem to be the presence of a courtyard, a strictly Indian concept, this would not be the correct answer. You see, quite a few Europeans had adopted the courtyard into their colonial homes. It just made sense to have one in the tropical swampland of Bengal. No, the answer lies in the surrounding areas of the manor. While the Europeans measured their wealth in money, the Bengali baboo measured his in men. How many men, who'd live off the baboo's family, would offer him protection? How many would work for him, and how many would bow to him? These questions are answered by the bustees that sprang up next to these grand houses, and remain the main reason behind the narrow alleys of North Calcutta. The richer you were, the more people built their houses on your land and gave themselves in servitude to you.

These houses are all now crumbling. Calcutta has a problem. It spreads like a tumour. Malignant, malformed. The walls come down, brick by brick. Heritage is but a buzzword thrown around by hoteliers. It is difficult to blame the owners. The city is not what it once was, and neither are the families that built (or rather paid for) it. It is difficult to afford upkeep. Mind you, these houses were not just built for families but also for a bevy of servants and employees. This wasn't just a house. It was the epicentre of a sprawling legacy, carefully curated by the patriarch. It is neither complicated, nor wrong, to point to the dissolution of the Joint Family as one of the main reasons behind the decline of these grand mansions. How many people still live here, and how many will in ten years? What then should we do? Break them down and build huge apartments that challenge the skies? What then of our heritage, the last vestige of a floundering state?

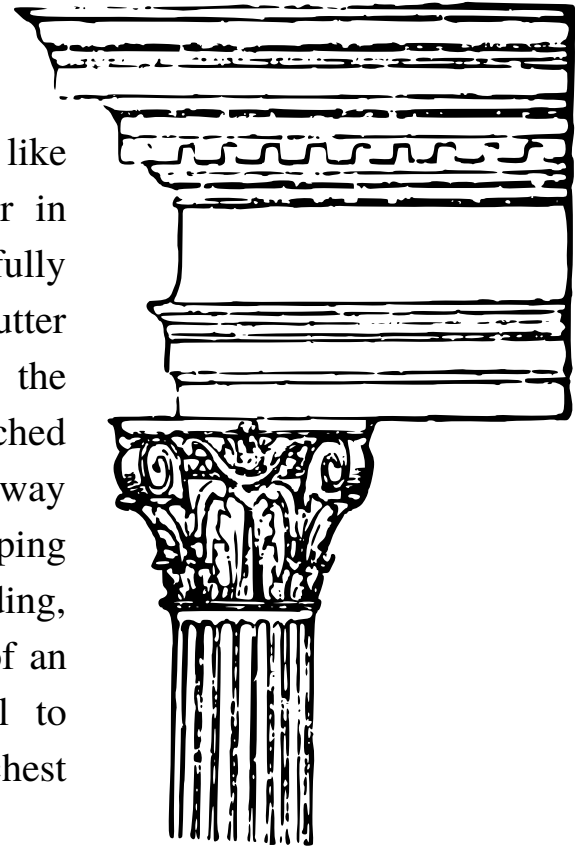


The main problem, and a reason why Kolkata still hasn't received the World Heritage Site moniker, is the lack of Governmental care. If one were to go to the official website for the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, and find the list of Graded Heritage Buildings, you'd notice that the disclaimer is dated 25th February 2009. It is a 14 year old list, and for no good reason. The list gives us a total of 915, which seems incredibly low. Almost offensively low. On top of that buildings are frequently downgraded so they can be demolished. Who knows what will befall the grand Statesman building. Even ex-employees aren't sure. We hear talks of a mall, and we see scaffolding. But a definite answer remains elusive. The Heritage of this city is in a state of limbo, and there seems to be no way out of it without proper Government intervention.

We reach Sovabazar, exhausted already. The sky is overcast, and rain seems imminent. The lanes are narrow and confusing, the wide thoroughfares of South Calcutta feel like a distant dream. Cars stream by, and the odd tailgate hits the fruit vendor who displays his wares on the road. Each alley feels the same, yet different. We made the mistake of going on a Sunday. The offices of the Sovabazar Rajbari were closed, and a full tour was not possible. However, a man who we never saw (all we could hear was a disembodied voice), told us to walk into the courtyard and take a look.

The thakurdalan of the baag-ola rajbari, so named because of the lion statuettes at the gate, is a wonderful sight, and hardly replicated outside Bengal. The architectural splendour of the courtyard stuccowork, while being intrinsically interlinked with hindu festivities, borrows heavily both from the Mughal cusped arch and contemporary European arches. The different styles synergise well together, leaving one to simply sit and stare at the little details of the semi-circular carvings of the thakurdalan. The early morning serenity is broken by the odd caw of a crow perched on the tuscan columns of the nat mandap. It was here that company pujo began, sealing Calcutta's fate after the Battle of Plassey in 1757. A friend of Robert Clive, Raja Nabakrishna Deb, the patriarch of the Royal Sovabajar Family, laid the foundation of a lineage that in many ways furthered the cause of arts and culture in Calcutta, linking the importance of this lavish mansion with that of the city as a whole.

But Sovabajar is more than the rajbari(s). The lanes twist like snakes, as one well-maintained house gives way to four in urgent need of repairs. Dogs sleep on sacks outside wonderfully carved wooden doors painted green and pink. Sparrows flutter around as the lanes close in on us, and it is here that the corinthian columns, painted brick red, combined with arched gothic windows, fill you with a sense of awe. As we drive away in Harry's trusty Volkswagen Polo, we spot the odd shopping complex, and the even rarer skyscraper. An art deco building, built years after the North had lost its footing as the hub of an ever-growing metropolis, surprises us. We bid farewell to Sovabazar, choosing to focus now on what was once the richest neighbourhood in all of Calcutta. Pathuriaghata.



Columns and intricate gates line the lanes. Even the crowded bazaar is not spared of the resplendent abodes of the former zamindars of Calcutta. The Mallickbari of Pathuriaghata impresses immediately with its impressive facade, composed of 14 Greek Corinthian columns. The interior, which hosts the thakurdalan is equally impressive, adorned by inimitably intricate cast iron work. A huge mansion, part of it has been beautifully restored, while the other half remains in shambles. One should not, however, blame the family for this, as upkeep costs lakhs, and who knows how much a full-blown restoration project would cost. I, however, wish them the best, and hope that one day the house can be brought back to its former beauty.

As we walk through the lanes we come across another mansion, named Jorasanko Rajbati. We stand outside, looking at the beautiful collonaded front of Rajendra Narayan Roy's house. It is difficult to estimate the age of the building, considering its style, but the 1850s would be a good bet. A man waves us in, and we walk past the derelict fountain, into an impressive yellow courtyard. We are surrounded by a mix of doric and ionic pillars on all sides. Burma teak doors and windows, with minute wooden embellishments stare back at us. It is not difficult to imagine the pomp and splendour of such a house, and we, like children, are caught daydreaming.

This is where my great grandfather made his fortune, where he fell in love and married a woman, where he lived and where he worked. He might have passed away in Dum Dum, years after the zamindari had been abolished, but he was nurtured and cared for here, in these lanes. It was here that my grandmother was born, and where she spent the formative years of her life. And yet, somehow, it remains forgotten among almost all the residents living south of the Park Circus line. Perhaps, this is the price to pay for growth. As Calcutta grows, forming the Calcutta Metropolitan area, covering over 700 square miles, we forget more and more about its origins. The North still brings with it a certain charm that cannot be replicated in the modern satellite cities of Bidhannagar, with its four lane roadways that leave pedestrians hanging out to dry. The crumbling houses, quite literally, are the symbols of our history. Soon, the house in Joynagar where Bankimchandra wrote the premise to Anandamath, will be broken down and replaced by apartment buildings. A fragment of literary history will be lost forever to time, alive only in my memory as a friend's house where we spent hours talking and laughing.

This article would not have been possible without Aryaman Manna and Kushal Garg who not only accompanied me on my trip to the North, but also took some truly incredible pictures that we will be sharing in this issue; Emilie Bhowmik, a dear friend, who while suffering from a bout of viral fever, was kind enough to help me understand the nuances of Indo-European architecture; Rushali Mukherjee for the wonderful cover that she has made for this article; and Sei Vui which provided us all with some of the most wonderful food we've ever had.













Notes On Memory



SONIA CHAUHAN

Of the million demands Beeju made of me, I remember just one. Never be lonely, he said one time. The lonelier you are, the louder your thoughts become. And then it's like you're hounded by sounds. All forms of it – clamour and quiet – climb into your soul and spread ugly in your blood.

I'm learning that Beeju was right. It's my sole reason to go to work. A roaring tsunami of silence chases me at home, bouncing off the empty hallways. In bed, giggles lash out at me when I turn sides. I wake up gasping. What was that, I ask Beeju, whipping my head this way and that. Where's this coming from? He never replies, not at night.

It's hard to lie still with the sounds. I have to leave the bed. These days, I find myself at work at 6 a.m.

In the taxi on my way home, I try to keep my eyes on the clouds and recall Beeju's laughter. You could close your eyes to shut the images. But how do you close your ears? Sounds of all shapes eat at me. Oceans of sludge slewing into a river. The river was too small to contain, the sludge too large to stop.

And if it weren't for these clattering thoughts, I could've heard the driver.

“Kavya Madam. O, Kavya Madam?” he bellows, smacking the horn.

I tear my gaze from the misty window.

“Your stop, madam,” he says mildly.

They ask me to leave in the evenings now. No more overtime. It's for my health, they say, pinning me with their fake-soft eyes.

I nod a thanks to the driver and angle one leg out to the pavement. Rain rushes down like a spray of crystals and in a blink, my leg is soaked. I'm drenched in the three steps it takes to reach the foyer. The dry people gathered under it watched the rain as if they could stop it. As if they're bigger than the rain.

In the elevator, I wipe my face again. This is settling into a habit. When I'm in a closed space with people, I have to put my palms over my face. Press my eyes with my fingertips. Swipe circles all over my face till it's safe to look up again without crying. Unlocking my front door, I wonder where all these tears are going, the ones I'm gulping down. Sometimes when my stomach hurts, I worry that it's from containing all the tears.

My apartment is a no-frills two-bedroom. In the tiny kitchen, I start the coffee machine. My handbag pokes into my elbow as I measure the beans. I let it slide to the floor. The black mug foams like a blossom as I pour in the milk. Mug in hand, I walk over to the balcony.

I bought this mediocre-by-lenient-standards-house because of this balcony. It's only a fibre-glass railing topped with a steel bar. But balconies are always about the view. And the first time I saw the view from here, I felt like I was shown my place in the universe. Like I was chosen to watch this view for the rest of my life.

The first time I stood here, and I saw what it showed me, it was as if all the rotten sounds floating in my body collated into an ugly bouquet. Licks of fire hissing over oil spills in the ocean. Ducks thwacking through algae with their little webbed feet.

Now, I set my mug on the wet railing and wait. In the distance, people gather under a decrepit tin roof.

My coffee's cooling but I never drink it before they bring the body. I peer at the dilapidated gate. Here they are. Four men lifting a cot draped with white sheets. I take the first sip. In a few minutes, they set it on the pyre. A few women throw themselves over it, wailing. They're too far but I hear them crying in my head.



“Keeping up with your creepy habits?”

I smile at Beeju’s familiar voice.

“Guilty pleasures,” I tell him.

He stands close to me and we watch. In the distance, a young boy circles the pyre.

“You should never have bought this dump, Kavya,” he says, leaning with his back to the railing.

“Does your opinion count, now?” I scoff, taking another sip.

“Funerals, Kavya? We’re watching funerals now? You’re officially the crazy lady.”

“Oh, aren’t we all?” I sigh.

When he was alive, Beeju and I always talked about inconsequential matters. Now I try to remember exactly what we said during those days but for some reason, I can’t recount a single concrete exchange. I only remember how it feels to talk to Beeju.

I feel his touch on my shoulder and sharp pain builds behind my eyes. I shut them tight and place both palms over my face. I’m doing it again, wrestling with my face until it gives in. By the time I’ve rearranged my features, my face is hot with the brawl.

Under the tin roof, they’ve lit the pyre. It bursts into flames right away like it’s been loaded with explosives. People sob. Their tiny shoulders heave.

Beeju clicks his tongue. “Such misery. Why can’t the living let the dead lie in peace?”

“Because the dead won’t let them live in peace.”

Beeju loops an arm around my waist and I lean into him. “I’m worried, Kavya. Seriously, this stuff is depressing.”

“Give it time,” I say, breathing in his clean scent. Beeju always smells of freshly laundered clothes.

He chuckles. “Imagine the look on your mother’s face if she finds out. What would you tell her? You asked me to get a new hobby, Ma-,”

My phone writhes and I pull it out.

“Hi, Ma. I was just thinking about you.” I break from his embrace and pick up my coffee mug. He tries to turn away but I hold on, pleading with my eyes.

Don’t go yet.

Beeju reclines into the railing with a sigh. Ma rants about ‘her boy’ who she wants me to meet—but-there-is-familiarity-boy—and how I should make more of an effort.

“Okay, fine. I’ll meet him tomorrow,” I say, to shut her up.

Beeju looks down to adjust his cuffs and for the thousandth time, his hair falls into his eyes. He’s so beautiful it hurts to look at him. I close my eyes for just a second and when I open them, Beeju’s gone.

“Speak later, Ma.”

Under the tin roof, those people have left. It’s just me and the burning body.

People always talk about nostalgia in mild and pleasant tones. Perhaps it hasn’t gripped them yet how grinding nostalgia can be. With buttery fingers, it kneads your soul like a flab of dough. So much so that sometimes you transcend events and memories, reaching a place of objective analysis.

Here’s something I’ve found out about memories. They don’t keep time. There are no quarter past fives, only the clementine slant of a setting sun. Memories keep no dates either. No sixth of Octobers or eight of Marchs but the yellow-brown leaves crunching under your step, or dandelions making your nose stuffy.

And when your nostalgia is in the shape of a person, you're like a bomb that never goes off. Your fate is to tick and tick and tick. Then, one day you just stop. I don't know what happens after that. A mute bomb perplexes me more than a ticking bomb.

Sick with these thoughts, I stumble into the local coffee shop to meet Ma's boy. His name is Rakesh and he keeps shining his shoes at the back of his slacks. He looks sad. I chide myself to be decent.

"How's Mini aunty?" I break the silence.

"Ahem, mummy's good. Joint pains and all but otherwise, ahem, fine," he says, clearing his throat time and again.

Rakesh keeps darting looks at the door. I wonder if he's meeting someone else after me. Maybe he's got a girlfriend. That would be interesting.

"Have you a sore throat?" I glance at his Adam's apple which is ordinary. On Beeju, it feels like a gift.

Rakesh clasps his hands on the table. "Ahem, no. I'm just. Well, a bit."

I order him a masala chai. His gaze travels over my face as I talk to the waiter. We fall into silence again.

I will myself to speak. "So, you're a psychologist. You must have some interesting stories to tell."

"Oh, that's clinical. I just teach," he says.

"Not like therapy, then?"

"Ahem, no."

"Why not?"

"Well, there are a lot of crazies out there," he replies. No throat clearing this time. "But let's talk about you. Do you have any questions or shall I go first?"

I crack my knuckles against my neck while I tell myself to like him. Then I recall Ma's words.

You don't remember it but he was your best friend when you were four. You never went cycling without him. It's time to be a big girl, Kavya. And you know what big girls do? Big girls know when it's time to stop and let go.

"Ahem, what are your hobbies?" Rakesh asks.



There's a commotion at the door. A rush of girls enter the café, shrieking like witches. Beeju enters after them. He goes around to the counter and picks up the menu. A gentle curve plays on his lips as they move in a soft murmur. Beeju would spend so long studying every menu and always order the same thing, fried eggs and hash browns.

Still wearing that beatific smile, he slides into a booth by the window. Beeju was the one who cooked at home and he only knew how to make potatoes and eggs. In five different ways, he'd protest, holding up his palm, fingers up. He'd make up stupid songs as he cracked eggs on our little skillet.

I notice how this memory of Beeju is silent. I can see the movements of his lips—the yawning and flailing and singing—but there's no accompanying sound.

“So, ahem, your hobbies?” Rakesh butts in again.

You see that? How a memory can roll out of nothing like a landslide? Gathering moss and earth and little unrelated rocks that happen to be on the way until it engulfs you whole.

I flicker my gaze between the two men. The one sitting across from me raises his eyebrows while the one sitting by the window blows me a kiss.

I open my mouth while my eyes are stuck at Beeju. “I like—“

Beeju widens his eyes. Do not tell him.

“— watching funerals,” I finish.

“I'm sorry?” Rakesh narrows his eyes.

A wave of satisfaction hits my chest as if I'm sitting inside a chocolate fountain.

“Funerals,” I repeat. “You know, when they set dead people on fire? I like watching them. It's a hobby.”

The cup rattles in its saucer as he plonks it down. After that, it's all quiet. I call for the bill.

In the taxi, I'm out of breath. It's a nasty moist day and the window roller's jammed. Next to me, Beeju sits unfazed with his legs crossed over each other. He's already in the taxi when it arrives. I close my eyes and wish him gone. It's rare when I feel like I don't need Beeju around. But I just want to be alone right now. Or lonely.

The taxi glides into a poor neighbourhood, past shabby homes and unkempt parks, past the drab crematorium where Beeju was burnt. I didn't attend his funeral. I'd spent too much time looking for a white shirt. I only had white trousers. So I'd worn them – the only pair of trousers I owned – and gotten into another taxi much like this one. I couldn't get out when it stopped. I'd looked out the window and then I'd looked at my lap.

I can't move, I'd told the driver, shocked by my legs of lead.

Beeju touches my shoulder just then, startling me out of the reverie. I snap my eyebrows. He tries to take my hand but I snatch it back. A little scuffle ensues. He grabs my arm and I push him back. Unfazed, he wraps his arms around me and pulls me against his chest. The fight slides out of me like a snake slithering out of its skin.

Beeju clears his throat as I snuggle up to him, rolling my eyes.

“Now, enough of watching funerals,” he says, “You should start showing up. Strange people dying. Strange people crying. And you in the middle of it all. Kavya, the journalist who tracks and reports global misery.”

“Shut up,” I whisper under my breath. The driver glances up in the rear-view mirror. I move away to stare out of the window.

Did I say that out loud?

“And then you start giving eulogies,” Beeju continues, “Who knows, maybe they’ll let you do it. You know what, prep a few generic ones. We don’t want to ruffle any feathers.”

I ignore him and we ride in peace. From the corner of my eye, I see Beeju’s shoulders shaking with mirth. I give him a pointed look and he bursts into loud, raucous laughter. There’s a lodge of laughter inside my heart. Every blinding blizzard of his laugh is stored in there.

“Why’re you laughing?” I ask him.

He slaps his thigh. “Just... the look on his face. As if you’d asked for his liver.”

I watch his fit of laughter enfold, memorizing his every move, every snigger, every flash of his teeth.

Beeju is so alive, so here.

“Oh, Kavya. You’re a dangerous woman,” he says, blowing out breaths.

“Lots of crazies out there,” I reply, tucking my forehead under his Adam’s Apple.





No Path In Darjeeling is Straight



A I S H I S A H A

Parimal Bhattacharya's 'No Path in Darjeeling in Straight' is a wonderful and insightful prose piece about the hill town of Darjeeling in West Bengal – it is not a mere linear sketch but explores the many-layered narrative of a town often left without a voice. I'm usually not the biggest fan of non-fiction writing, but this one intrigued me. Bhattacharya's style is lucid, almost musical. One can almost see the fog on the road ahead as they journey along with the author and his companions in the search of an ancient tribal settlement.

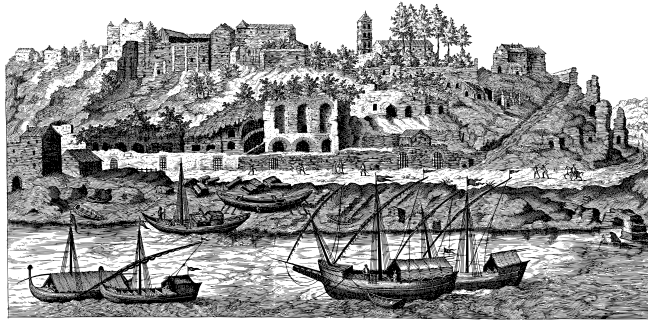
Mark Tully, whose writings have been referred to by Bhattacharya in the work, calls the book a "prose elegy." I don't quite understand the usage of the term 'elegy.' It is not a dirge or a requiem – it is a poetic elaboration of Darjeeling in its moments of quiet yet captivating beauty and misunderstood anger termed 'anti-national.' It is for the first time a human voice behind those kindly faces that we have the nastiest tendency to clump together to be of homogenous ethnicity. It prods us to look deeper, question our own perspective of history and politics and how we see the world. Darjeeling is probably the commonest and the most favourite among holiday spots if you ask any regular middle-class Bengali. However, behind its tea estates and sunrise at Tiger Hill, there is a story of colonialism, forbearance, daring to hope, and finally, rebellion.

The issue of identity gains central importance as Bhattacharya delves into the multiplicity of ethnic groups found in Darjeeling. He calls all of them 'Darjeelingees.' Recently, in a class about Partition literature, our professor mentioned that in the 19th century, for the first time, the British organised a Census board to conduct a study of the demographic of colonial India. What it essentially entailed was a sudden assertion of individual identity – an awareness that one was Hindu and the other Muslim and thus different from one another – and whether your section belonged to the majority or the minority. From this rose a sense of distrust and threat.

This is, of course, not to say that the awareness of diversity did not already exist in the society, but for the first time, they had been politically categorised. Why I talk about this here is to reiterate Bhattacharya's point that for the longest time, the people of Darjeeling have been regarded as – different. By the people of the state itself. And this 'difference' was something very political – a difference that made them the 'Other.' And when these people, after decades of being disregarded, wanted their identity as the 'Other' to be recognised in the books and rose up in the demand for 'Gorkhaland,' they met with brutal state violence, lathicharge on peaceful gatherings.

Bhattacharya talks about many things about the hill-town that usually go unnoticed. Being a hillstation, the biggest flock of tourists arrive when it is summer in the plains of India and thus swelteringly, mind-bogglingly hot. One cannot sit at Maidan after 12 in the noon up to about 4:30 without risking a stroke. This is the time when people look for a cool getaway and many flock to Darjeeling in this season as respite from the unrelenting heat. However, the author is more interested in discovering the nooks and crannies of Darjeeling during the rainy season – July and August – which he says are the 'cruellest' months there. The author is a professor who was posted in Darjeeling in the 1990s, just when the fervour of the uprising was beginning to die down. He writes about Pratap, a student from a remote village called Tuia – in fact, Bhattacharya calls it 'less than a village.' This village was like a hole in the fabric of civilisation, deserted by science and technological advancement. Electricity was not available there. It reeked of governmental neglect. Ironically, Bhattacharya notes that the only 'import from the outside world' was goods of plastic. The description of Tuia is sad and desolate. Pratap claims that there is nothing to hold anyone back in Tuia, hence why nobody that left ever returned. Of course, Tuia serves a very important purpose in Bhattacharya's memoir about Darjeeling – it is representative of many such hamlets in the slopes and shades of hills that are outside the radar and reach of civilisation and this shows a failure on the side of the administration.

He meets Nikhil Tamang who is really the figure of warm welcome to the author on his arrival to the hill-town. He then explains the title of the text – 'No path in Darjeeling is straight.' To really know the town from close quarters, one must take the winding roads crisscrossing the broad streets which are called 'chor bato' by the locals. These chor batos were introduced to the author by his North Indian colleague, Hemraj Chhetri. Chhetri belonged to a Rajput family that had supposedly taken refuge in the kingdom of Nepal during the Mughal era in India. However, Chhetri's interests lay elsewhere. He was a researcher in the Zoology department of the author's college and his subject of interest was the Himalayan salamander – *Tylototriton verrucosus*. These creatures were considered to be extinct until they were found in the pokhris of Darjeeling, which had eventually been brought down to a very low number with the large-scale establishment of tea estates.



Here again is a tale of neglect that Bhattacharya underlines with quietude. Though these rare species existed in the pools of Darjeeling, the government did not do much to preserve the alarmingly low numbers. Whenever one thinks of agriculture in West Bengal, it is the face of a girl amidst a paddy field that comes to mind. Whenever one thinks of any animal associated with West Bengal, one thinks of the Royal Bengal Tiger. The salamander is overlooked as trivial in comparison.

The author makes other friends and acquaintances as well. Benson, a Malayali, stays in his life for a short while, leaving a permanent mark, before passing away in 2007. At Loreto College, he meets Julia Griffith who had come from England to research on the Lepcha tribe. Julia had come to Darjeeling to reconnect with a long dead family member – Csoma de Koros. It is interesting to note Julia's attitude towards India as a colony of Britain. Multiple times in the book Bhattacharya mentions that she looked at it from a different perspective. To begin with, she never called 1947 the year of India's independence – she called it the transfer of power. There is marked reluctance in admitting the evils of imperialism though the author tries to remain as neutral as possible. However, when the author along with Julia and Hemraj take the trip to locate a Lepcha tribe in the Singalila forest, Bhattacharya writes – 'Be it a café in Darjeeling or deep in the mountains, Julia would be the speaker and I the listener – always' – I'm not sure if the underlying irony is intended or if it is just an innocuous observation on the part of the author, but it establishes a sort of dynamic between him and the British woman, one in which the latter enjoyed a more assertive role than the other and this becomes critical because of her nationality and India's colonial history.

Bhattacharya was transferred to Calcutta in 1999 but his memories of the hill-town have remained and they urged him to make a trip back and see how the place had changed over the time. There is poignancy in his recounting of the old days, passionate vigour in explaining the politics of the hill people. He truly reaches the heart of Darjeeling and lays it bare on paper.





spaces



CELIN SOHET

#1

I walked. I reached the steps. I heard voices. Male voices. It was the junior combination room, open for all, for leisure. There were a few shoes kept outside. Men's shoes. There was a guard sitting outside. I went to the door and peeped inside. A few men at the foosball table, a few playing table tennis. I turned back. Fiddled around the shoe rack. Should I go in? If there were some guy I knew, I'd go in. I really want to sit somewhere. And I don't want to sit outside; it's too hot. Should I just go in? But I don't know any of them. I peeped in again. It was really cool inside. They looked at me peeping. What should I do? I'll just go in. What am I afraid of? It's broad daylight. There's a guard. It's a public space in an educational institution. I have the right to sit here. I'll go in. I stepped inside and sat in a corner. It was no longer about just relaxing somewhere. Some other purpose had taken greater precedence. I left after fifteen minutes.



#2

They arrived. I knew them, a little. I had seen them for functions. Must be distant relatives or friends of relatives. My father asked them to sit. He sat too. My mother stood close by where he sat. I stood beside her. Everyone started talking. How are things? How was the rain? How is work? How are the kids? An occasional laughter. Why do I feel so wronged? There's more than enough space on the couch for more than three people to sit. Why is my mother standing? Why am I? Why is everyone who is sitting a man? Why didn't anyone ask my mother to sit? Was that not customary? My father indicated with his hands to get them something to drink. They protested playfully out of courtesy, but still hoping to get something to drink. My mother denied their friendly protests and immediately went to the kitchen. Now I was the only one left standing. My mother came back with the drinks and served them. She had four glasses for three of them and one for my father. After placing the tray on the table, she retired to her previous position, at the edge of the room. No more! I went forward and sat down next to my father. I wasn't tired, nor did I want to sit. I wanted to make a statement.

After a while, they left.





Where Tears and Smiles Don't Cross



CELIN SOHET

I'm in a place where tears and smiles don't cross.

It was not at all peaceful. It was so noisy – people walking in and out, many crying, many even talking and playing. My house was completely decorated with white flowers and black badges and flags. My posters were put up from a distance away till my house. Should I read today's newspaper, I would find my photo there along with all the others. I don't think the newspaper boy had the guts to come near my house with all this chaos going on. There were a lot of people. But, trust me, if it were my wedding there would've been a thousand more. Who would want to come to a funeral and sit and mourn other than people who really care and others who are obliged to come no matter what? I'm sleeping in a different bed today, decorated completely with flowers, for today, I am being taken to my funeral.

The new bed was really congested, with not much space to move about. But why would I want to do that when I'm dead? I was dressed in pure white. I always wanted one like this. And they buy it for me for my funeral. That's ironic! I had a crucifix in my gloved hands and a crown on my head. White roses covered my body from top to bottom. It was really suffocating. People were passing by me – people whom I hadn't seen in the past ten years and even people I never knew. My friends, my cousins, and all my neighbours were here. My mom was beside me, beside my bed, crying, "She ... was the most perfect ... girl. And she was only seventeen. She had thousands of dreams. How could she die like this?" How could I? How could I die like this? Like it was my choice, even to die. I was brutally raped and killed by a few men, no monsters. I'm sure they will be close by, enjoying their feast over their prize last night.

“The priest will be here in an hour or so,” announced one of my neighbours, with a grim face that he had put up for convenience. Not the church, at the beach. I want to be buried at some beach. Oh! How I loved it! I loved the sand, how the sun felt against my skin, how the waves lashed onto me, and how my toes wriggled in the salty water. But mostly, how I could smile at nothing, looking out as far as my eyes could carry. But I always felt less. I wanted to spend a lifetime at the beach, looking out into nothing. That’s why I recommended this idea of mine to my parents. I’m sure they’d go along. See, that’s why I never was afraid of death. I understood the concept so well. I always saw it coming, but not yesterday – not yesterday because today was my farewell at school. I never wanted to miss that last day. But it looks like everyone did. I’m sure there’d be at least a few kids at school who are happy that they got a holiday due to my death. I won’t blame them. They just haven’t had that realization yet. My mom was still crying, and my sister was at my feet, still. A few people mourned for this reason, but a few mourned for me. My dad was in that chair in the corner. Today I saw him shed his first tear in all my life. Just then, my uncle walked up to him. “Where we do, huh” he was reluctant, “Where do we make sure that she rests in peace?” he put his hand on my dad’s shoulder and looked at him for an answer. “At the seashore, where she wanted it,” his voice was stern, unhesitant.

People were finding it really hard to make a few tears fall down. I could see them trying so hard. Outside, people had formed their groups and were chatting about last night’s football match, which I had missed. People even talked about office matters or film gossip. Many even complained. “Why should she go there alone at night?” said a middle-aged woman with horn-rimmed spectacles. “Her arrogance,” remarked a gentleman in a suit. Of course! It’s my fault. The kind gentlemen who assaulted me did nothing wrong. Let my attackers be raised to glory in heaven. No wonder this world is still like this. But some said, “Poor little girl. She was so young.” The old banyan tree in front of my house shed its last leaf.

The autumn leaves were blown into the patio by the wind, which dragged me back inside too. Tears were flowing like fast rivers from my friends’ eyes. A tear even dropped on my palm from her eyes. “If you were here today,” she said, “you would’ve stood up for all the women in the world. You would give them a voice. You wouldn’t rest until your country had peace. But ...” her tears gulped up her words, “if ...none of this would’ve happened, we’d be at school, laughing, having fun, on our last day together. You’d be there to make us understand what it meant. You’d be with us making us smile at our wonderful years together,” she was smiling with tears in her eyes. I was the last person to cry at my funeral.

Soon the priest came, remarked only good things about me and said the last prayers, and took me to the beach. They covered me with sand, but I could still hear my mom crying. After a while, everyone left. And I was finally, truly alone. I looked out onto the horizon. The sun was setting. The sea turned orange. Tiny waves crashed onto my stone. I am going to miss this – my life. I am going to miss fighting with my sister. I am going to miss the fun with my parents. I am going to miss laughing with my friends. But above all, I am going to miss standing in front of my mirror and saying, “You’re the perfect girl – the girl who never stopped smiling”

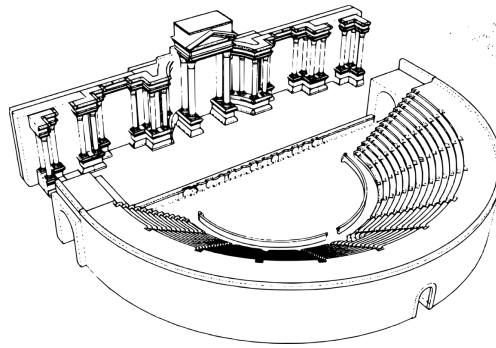




home-made theatre



ANANNYA NATH



at nine, the house is summoned
to a scaffold on fire
when nobody touches the rice
made by breaking bones
and dreams; ignorance is an answer,
breakfasts encounters;
my mouth a revolution,
I empty words on coffee mug;
the sugar melts like Maa's prayers-
love is sharing
when the women eat
what their men leave in love- on a plate,
the leftover love for leftover women
crashes against tongues like solitaire
the pain of stillborn respect
mimics frostbite on sullen nights-

impossible longing,
the eventual oblivion;
breakfast is proscenium
for a one-act play
where the patriarch and the feminist
set the stage ablaze
everybody eats with ears cocked towards
his note of dismissal,
like him
ignore the broken bones
and burnt fingers;
the harangue in my mind
becomes
my mother's lost appetite.



this house of yours



MUNJARITA MONDAL

Here we tiptoe around grief and each other
speak softly and sigh even softer
careful of the rust in our whispers that
disturbs this house, your house.

as I drift off to deeper sleep I sense the
walls drawing nearer

It keeps us safe when

It is late and the sun is weak

when afternoon slips

like decay under the wood panels

we wait for you, as one does.

a stray splinter cuts me into awareness
of the shadows slanted near the threshold,
the heavy weight of you, leaning against
the doorframe

I push you gently over the edge, as one does

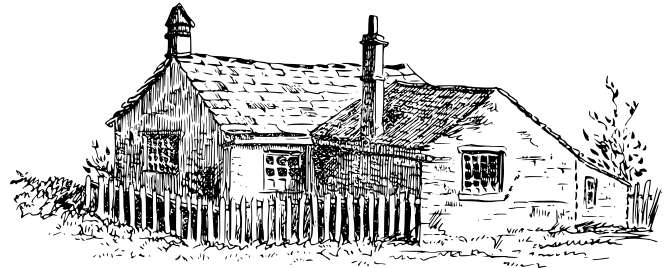
I watch you fall, and you let me

The ways of this house

that fills you with love and a gentle dread

that you accept, with gratitude, as one does

The curse of their mother.



A lime grove draws you closer to earth
The bees come and you accept their love
with gentle ease, as one does

I wonder if the vines are enough
to hang your man

Mercifully

and in deliberate love

There is no secret kept around the looming pillars;
sad and wise in their lofty dreams

If you listen closely the house breathes
and you know,

deep inside your belly you know,
all that lives must die in this soil,

In the shade of the lime grove, near the hum of the
bees

In this house where you belong with us
here your man and I,

tiptoe around brittle bones and each other
waiting by the threshold in mildew and rot,

In this house of yours.

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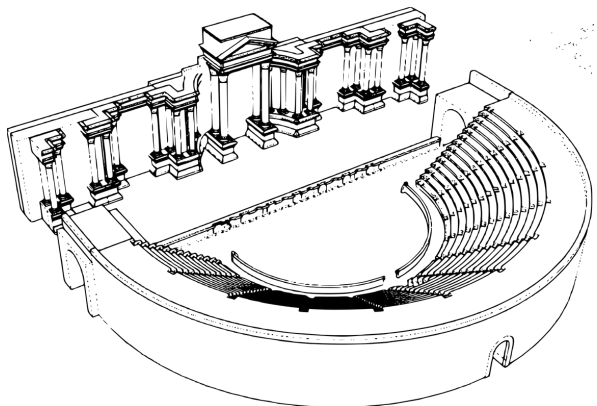
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