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Yellow Light



The land rises and falls, a geological breath.

It rises into low brown hills of bare rock, and falls in small brown valleys of loose gravel. A sky faded from too much light, hangs very far above, unreachable. From it, the sun plunges down, ripening rocks and gravel, brush and thorns. The traveler does not choose his landscapes. He takes what comes. Instead of a forest he may find a desert, instead of a pond with the tiniest fish he may find an ocean that has no end. Some will tell him that he may find what he needs instead of what he desires. And he will tell them that he has no desires left because they have all turned into need.

His fears will travel with him, clinging to him with an endless love.

Each thing here, the rocks, the light, the soil, the heat, is hard and unbending. They equal each other in their devastating perseverance. The only things that seem airy and light are the shrubs that, from down below, seem to cling to the hillsides like grey brown clouds. But up above, when I touch them, they are as persistent as everything else here, strong, rough, unbreakable, rooted so deep into the hillside that even if I pull hard at the lowermost parts, I cannot dislodge them in any way. In the land below the hills, there are a few emaciated trees with green leaves, and though they may throw a shadow they never give shade. This is the edge of the diminutive town.

Four mausoleums stand below the hills, made of dark brown stone, placed at intervals from each other. Here the stone has been worked upon. There are arched entrances, carved niches and ledges, filigreed windows, and bands of carvings around the bases of the domes. Near them is a white dargah that reflects and multiplies the light of the sun.

“Six hundred years,” he says. “Shaykh Sharafuddin’s dargah.” The keeper of this dargah is a slim, quietly smiling old man. “And the mausoleums go back five hundred years. Some are generals, some are Sufis. They all wanted to be buried here near the Shaykh. Five hundred years...This is an ancient, sacred place.”

The man’s courteous body, bent ever so slightly and gathered inwards, now straightens gradually into satisfaction.

“Come,” he ushers me in. His long, faded green robe is shapeless and too long. It sweeps the ground as he walks, gathering dirt and dust.

The courtyard has two rectangles of unexpected grass neatly trimmed, and on both there are several white graves. In between the graves, like the blooming of a sad pleasure, there are bushes with white flowers on them, the only flowers I have seen for miles.

The dargah is a small room, and so dark that my eyes take some time to discern the tomb covered with a green and gold cloth, the ceiling with sweeping curtains of red velvet edged with gold. It is a simple tomb, without any rose petals on it, in fact, without any flowers at all, without ceilings or walls that are richly decorated. Everything is sparkling clean and neatly kept. There is a band of shadow thrown by the roof onto the white platform outside the room. I sit inside it, but if I move back even a little I will be in the burning sun. A woman in a burkha comes, kneels in that sun, and begins to pray. She looks down, with her covered face, at the ground beneath her, then straight ahead at the tomb, and finally up at the blinding sky, all the while saying her prayers under her breath. When she finishes, she throws back the veil on her face, shades her eyes with her right hand, and looks at me, as if she had been aware of my presence all along.

“Will you be staying long?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I reply.

She looks around slowly, as if making sure the faded sky and the brown hills are in their places.

“We always have to kneel before darkness or blinding light, so that our eyes become useless,” she says.

She lowers her veil and resumes her prayers.

The dargah keeper blesses me from inside the room with the tomb. He asks me where I have come from. It is the only question he asks. I see in his eyes the most superficial curiosity, from which he wants to claim nothing. When I ask him his name the saddest smile appears on his face. He says his name is Rashid, with a long vowel at the beginning, which makes it different from the same name with the long vowel at the end, which means “friend”, whereas his name means “the one who shows the right way.”

I stand at the edge of the dargah, looking out for a long time.

“This soil... “ I say.

“It grows no flowers or leaves,” says Rashid, “because it gives rise to things more everlasting.”

A group of young boys, perhaps thirteen or fourteen years old, stand on the broad ledge that runs around one of the mausoleums. They stand there as if surveying the land. They look down at me.

“The entrance is behind,” they say. “But there’s nothing inside except a grave.” They are all thin and angular, their constantly darting eyes lined with surma. I ask them whose grave it is. They shrug their shoulders.

The large windows of the mausoleum are jalis made of tiny stars set in circles. The most delicate honeycomb pattern runs up the arched entrances. Inside, in the accumulated silence of centuries, there is a grave, on top of which is a single, shrivelled marigold from a few days ago. Time is not even here, only standing still. As I stand there something falls from the high dome far above and hits the grave. It is a sparrow, and it lies there with its tiny head half severed from its body. The severed head rests on the marigold, both equivalent in their extreme lightness. A strong wind coming in through one arch could blow them away through another. But there is no wind. The bird and the marigold are fated to remain where they are, till they become pared down, insubstantial, a past without its narrative.

An individual glance can revive nothing but itself.

Above the grave is the vast dome from where the sparrow has fallen. There a sudden, fragile turquoise can still be recognised, an indication that matter continues to be destroyed here, ceaselessly. But the jalis, created so long ago, are as potent now in the light of this present sun, allowing tiny points of illumination to hang suspended in the darkness. Is this why ancient things are indispensable, because they reveal time’s plurality? The light from the entrance is suddenly darkened. I see the boys gathered there, thin, dark shapes, with the sun behind them, curious to see why I am in here. With their coming time shows all its manifestations, and moves into eternity. But only for me. The boys turn their back on the darkness and go away.

When I travel I never seem to gather facts, like a historian or a journalist, or a scientist. What comes to me are only facts that I already know. I do not seek new ones. But this time I try and collect some rudimentary truths. This town has a total of 2507 males that are employed, and 347 females. The average income is Rs. 3,700. Some of these households have ten or eleven members. The larger the family here, the higher the income level.

Unskilled labour comprises 46.5% of the work force. There are construction workers, street sweepers, coolies, garbage collectors. A few beggars. The rest of the population is mostly made up of skilled labour-- painters, electricians, welders, masons, bakers, and potters. Some others are self-employed. In this category there are fruit and vegetable vendors, butchers, barbers, tailors, farmers. A very small part of the population are teachers, doctors, employees of the government.

There are no industries at all in this town.

The sun is getting lower in the sky as I begin to climb one of the hills. The boys follow me for a while.

“Are you going to the top of the hill?” one of them shouts. “There’s nothing there either.” I stop and look back at them. They are quite close to me. I see in their eyes the same look that I saw in the eyes of the dargah keeper, a curiosity followed rapidly by resignation, a foreknowledge that what is new will never belong to them.

I pass a cave on the side of the hill. Inside it a middle aged man is sitting with his eyes closed, hands on his knees. I keep climbing. My red bandhni dupatta is delicate and keeps getting caught on the sharp shrubs, so I leave it behind, hanging on a small bush, intending to pick it up on the way back. I reach the top of the hill and look at the orange sun. A vast range of low, brown hills spread out before me, in the sunset light. Below, the dry bed of what was once a river. Nearby, a mile or so away, Aurangzeb lies buried in a surprisingly simple tomb, a slab of marble. This simple grave was paid for by the Emperor with money he had earned from the sale of skullcaps that he had stitched with his own hands, and copies of the Koran that he had written out himself.

Across the hills is a fort built by Muhammad bin Tughlaq. Very near, but not seen from here, the Ellora caves, where sculptors met the sub-continent’s oldest rock, a granite that offered the greatest resistance. From this came the vigorous Shiva, the fierce Durga. As the sculptors overcame the resistance of the rock by understanding it, there came lovers leaning out into emptiness, and Jatayu flying through the air with urgent grace. This sedimentary rock goes back to the pre-Cambrian and early Paleozoic times, more than five hundred million years ago.

I hear a song coming from a distance. I turn around, and I see far below the boys standing at the bottom, talking and watching. A woman sits alone on a rock. The keeper of the dargah stands at his arched gate. But the song seems to come not from below, it seems to come from far above. I look around me, it is a circle this song. When I have searched more than half the cloudless sky I see two people on top of another hill, I don't know whether men or women, it is too far to tell, but I can tell they are holding hands, and they are singing. I don't know whether it is a song of prayer, or of love. It travels down the valleys and up the hills, the only moving thing in this landscape. Just as I was beginning to learn from the hard, unbending endurance of the rocks and shrubs, the song comes. It is constantly moving, it is not the past but now, and it will not endure. It frees me from anything so final as the learning of lessons.

As the darkness gathers I climb down the hill. Looking for my dupatta I go around many shrubs but do not find it. Someone has taken it in the time that I climbed up and back down again. Perhaps the boys, to give a girl that one of them desires, perhaps the man meditating in the cave. Red is an auspicious colour for many things.

At the bottom of the hill the boys are still shuffling in place, displacing the loose gravel on the road, throwing a few pebbles far in a cricket ball throwing gesture. "Someone took away the dupatta I had left on a bush up there," I ask them. "Has anyone seen it?"

"We don't know anything about up there," they say. There is so much movement in these boys, but these movements actually consist of twitches and jerks of the neck, the limbs, the face, and the desire to move seems to be greater than achieved movement. A man stands apart by himself, a tall, broadly built man in a white kurta and salwar, with thick surma lined eyes. He looks at me directly and holds the look.

"You have to leave something behind in exchange for what you've received," he says. "The dupatta was from the softest cotton, a little transparent, bandhni in yellow and red. Who knows the many uses it can be put to?" His eyes slide down to the place that the dupatta would have covered.

"Tell me," I say, keeping my eyes on his. "I'm curious to know."

"It would be good to spread it out on the hard grass, to look at the tiny yellow dots whose outlines merge like little flames into the red, to lie on its softness, and then to look up at the empty sky."

He knows that I will take something away from here inside myself, I think, but he doesn't know what. His eyes are different than those of the boys or the dargah keeper's. They are very still, and in them there is no resignation.

"You could do that," I say.

“I could, but I’m not the one who’s taken it. And then once someone lies on it, soon enough the sharpness of the thorns will tear it, in many places. Then it will have to change its function, it could become a rag for wiping things with, or it could be torn into thin strips, to make a wish at the dargah.”

The boys continue to shuffle their feet on the gravel as they listen to the conversation. Rashid sits on his haunches at the doorway, above him the large arch of the gate, and weeps into the sleeve of his faded green robe.

“Saleem,” he says, through his tears. “Saleem. No. No.”

My interrogator looks at him once, and then looks away.

Meanwhile the song goes on, rising and falling, the darkness allowing it even more space than the light.

The Sufis say that one travels for many reasons, to meet the masters, to achieve anonymity, for self discipline, to learn. “The influence of travel on taming souls is no less than that of prayer, or fasting.” The traveler knows that one can also travel because one has suffered. Not to seek a cure, or forget, but only to experience movement when one is exhausted by that which no longer has any life. There is no curiosity, nothing cranes forward, not the mind or the eyes. And suddenly one feels that is the way to see, that the sight goes farthest when everything inside the self stays in place.

In the early morning I walk out before the sun rises very high. I see Rashid watering his flowers and grass. Beyond the dargah there is a stretch of open land. There is only one tree with thick knobs on the trunk, and three branches. One branch grows diagonally to the left, another winds over it to the right, and the third is so short it is almost a stump, angled downwards. Each of these branches bear a few thorns. Underneath it, as if it were a tree which was offering shade, there is a corpulent woman in a burkha, in surya namaskar. She is a middle aged woman with an almost masculine face. Her eyes are small and on the high nose there is a silver nose ring. I watch as she bends her knees and brings her hand together before the sun with an extreme suppleness and grace. There is nothing between her and the ground. Her knees and palms rest on gravel and stones. When I come closer I see that her entire body is trembling, a very delicate trembling like the leaves of a tree in a mild wind.

I walk by but she sees me. She sits down on the gravel, cross legged. The trembling stops.

“You’re the one who lost her dupatta yesterday.”

I nod.

Her face is full of suspicion. “Are you married?”

“No.”

Her mouth twists into a vicious smile. “I thought not.”

I keep looking at her, knowing she wants me to ask her the same question.

“I’m married,” she says. “But I don’t have children,” she adds, her voice turning defiant.

She looks at the sun and joins her palms.

“Watch me all you want,” she says. Then she spits out her disdain, a small thick mass of saliva that sparkles like dew on the stones.

Her arms rise above her, come down, she kneels, she is on her hands and knees, her head goes down and up again towards the sun, a continuing, tremulous flow, untired. I watch her for a long time, unable to move. When I do begin walking on, she looks back at me, over her shoulder.

A graveyard sprouts between two hills, plants and fruit of the barren ground, without any walls to mark its place. It seems ready to multiply in all directions, nourished by the heat, the cloudless air. Sitting on a tombstone is my interlocutor from yesterday.

“There is one more thing I would really like to do with that dupatta,” he says.

“I would like to cover my eyes with its softness and keep out this light filled with malice. The perfume coming from the cloth, that smell of fading jasmine, would calm me, and maybe I would sleep, for at least an hour.”

It is afternoon. There is no one here. I sit before the room with the tomb, and let my eyes get used to the windowless darkness inside. Today there are rose petals strewn on the green cloth covering the tomb. There is an almost imperceptible smell of roses. A dagger of light suddenly cuts through the room, falls over the tomb, lights a few petals. From where has it come? It trembles constantly as if reflected in moving water. Now there appears a small arched window on the back wall from where a different sunlight can be seen, as pale as that on a winter’s day. My breath slows down. The dagger of light catches the frayed silver hem of a robe, moving, and beneath it two aged, slim brown feet. I kneel on the threshold and look in so that I can see better. I see movements, a piece of green robe, a foot, a long, slender hand, all as brief as the flutter of a passing wing. For only a moment, I close my eyes. When I open them I see an old man in a green robe with a frayed silver hem, standing

before the arched window. His back is towards me. Standing next to him I see, myself, holding a little girl in my arms. The little girl has hair full of curls, it is myself as a child. The man in the robe puts his hand on my head and strokes it. I stroke the head of the little girl who is me that I hold in my arms.

It is a childhood from the beginning severed from the child, a womanhood stopped short of itself, a serrated adulthood, forced and false in places, and in others luminous, capable of luring many things into its light.

The little girl begins to laugh. She laughs in the way that children sometimes do, without reason. As she laughs she turns her head and looks at me who holds her. The man in the robe takes the child's face in his palms. Then he gestures towards the outside beyond the window. I stand up to try and see what he is gesturing at. I can see nothing, the window is too high. Now I can hear water flowing, somewhere outside the window. It is like a faraway river, but soon the sound grows louder and more full, louder, louder, a waterfall. As the sound grows the figures disappear, and then the window and the light. The room becomes dark again. Only the rose petals remain.

Rashid walks in to the room and that is when the sound of the rushing water stops abruptly. I close my eyes.

A chronology has just been disrupted, a life's anachronisms have stood together, a consciousness has been given its images, with a terseness that has cleaved in a moment the prolixity of real life.

When I open my eyes Rashid is sweeping the tomb.

"You swept away the rose petals," I say.

His slim face undergoes a sudden change as if it was being battered, the cheekbones rise, the skin seems sucked inwards, the eyes are almost closed as if in pain.

"There are no roses for miles," he says in an angry whisper. "Once in a few months they come in from the city, looking as if they have already been on someone's grave."

He keeps looking at me. I turn my face away from him.

"Go away," he says. "Go. I have work to do here now. I'll be shutting the door of the dargah."

I am reluctant to leave. I keep looking into the small room, till Rashid begins to shut the door.

I do not know that I am walking out backwards, very slowly, putting one foot behind the other, slowly but firmly, without stumbling even once. Rashid continues to look at me, and I move back and back till the opening of the dargah is a black rectangle. When I have almost reached the arched gate,

Rashid calls after me, angry, demanding, "Come back in the evening." It is only outside the arched gate that I turn around and face the outside. The late afternoon sunlight and the barren hills face me.

Time goes so far back in this land that the traveller's questions sometimes have no answers. That frees him from actuality. It goes so far back that once he has felt the beauty of an artefact, as well as the inevitability of its decay, he is left only with time's incomprehensible sweep, which will make his own life larger, as if it were space. It will not matter that he has not done all he wanted, or that he has squandered his time despite himself, or that parts of him have not survived. His grief will find its proper place, unlike in his daily life. What will heal him is the many kinds of time that he will encounter, measured, immeasurable, the time of history and geology and tales, none of them the same. There will be past and present. The only thing he may not meet is the future. But that will not hurt the traveler who is always moving onward, ahead.

This evening a wind has risen, at first insidious and curving, moving swiftly between the hills. But soon it swells and begins to spread over everything, shaking even the stiff brush and thorns. Rashid sits just inside the threshold of the room with the tomb. Opposite him, right outside the threshold, sits the fat woman. Her back is towards me. The white light inside the dargah falls over them like a grievous blessing. It is a light that takes away the beauty of evening, which everyone has looked forward to in the day. The woman and Rashid seem to be looking at each other. Somewhere a man begins to wail. The woman immediately bows down her head, and Rashid blesses her with the broom. She walks away and he looks up and sees me.

He comes away from the white light inside the dargah, a light without shadows, without reprieve, he says. In the old days the lights were yellow, but the dargah committee brought in the white ones a few years ago. They last longer. A yellow light, can there be a simpler desire, he asks me, with a calm smile. There is no anger now on his face.

"Come," he says.

We turn our backs on the white light and make a half circle around the dargah and go to the low brick wall just behind. Beyond the wall there is a large rubbish dump. It has been rising higher and higher over the years, Rashid says and perhaps one day it will be higher than the hills. Thin white plastic bags are the only things visible in the dump, because the moon lights them up

with tenderness and the wind makes them swell and fall. For years, says Rashid, he has stood only on the other side watching the brown hills, or looking at the filigreed mausoleums outside the gate. Or he has climbed, at sunset, to the top of the old fort and looked around him, at the empty landscape, the sky. But he needs now, he says, to practice on things which are not beautiful, from which he can expect nothing. It is here that he stands every evening, thinking.

Rashid's skin is as smooth and moist as my own. It shows no signs of aging. Every day he tends the flowers and grass, he says. It is hard work keeping them alive. He cleans and looks after the dargah, arranges the qawali on Thursdays, cooks his meals, goes to the market, washes his clothes, prays. It is not a hard life. But how does one crawl out from under the piling up weight of the years? How does one live within one's circumstance and not dream about any other?

He looks at me, as if expecting an answer. I have none. I stare at the rubbish dump. The fetid smell is hard to bear.

In my childhood I used to have a dream that recurred, I tell him. I am walking down a street next to the large gray house in which I live in reality, its colors dulled by the sun and washed away by the rain. The street is also exactly the same as in reality, with the houses of my neighbourhood friends on either side. But, unlike in real life, there is an enormous heap of rubbish at the end of the street, the size of a small hill. In it is mud, loose soil, worms, coconut shells, rats, rags, mango peels, cooked rice and rotting vegetables, fish bones and half chewed fish heads. Standing next to it is a very old woman in a white sari stained with filth, thin, wiry, and with her matted hair knotted on the top of her head. She is toothless and she smiles at me. I know, with the kind of certainty one is given in dreams, that she is utter danger. She is waiting for me. I am transfixed, terrified, unable to move. I know I have to cross the hill of rubbish with the old woman next to it, I have to get to the other side. I cannot turn back the way I have come though that would be the easiest way to escape. For some reason that is not a choice open to me. The houses on the street are all quiet, no one at the windows or balconies, not a single person to help. That is where the dream ends.

The other recurring dream I had as a child, a companion dream, was this. I am in a deep green forest. Unlike in the other dream, I cannot not see myself from the outside, but can feel myself walking through the dense foliage, parting it, the leaves and twigs touching my face, brushing my eyelids, flattening under my feet. As I walk, I see birds on the branches, not high up and far away, but close to me, close to my face, looking at me, singing, calling, each bird different in shape and size and colour, a pie-crested cuckoo, a

kingfisher, birds from other lands and continents, a red-winged blackbird, a cardinal, a red headed woodpecker, on an and on I walk, and the birds keep appearing on branch after branch, every single one different from the other.

“You dreamt of human life,” says Rashid.

The wind has been intensifying all this time, gathering a sinister speed and force. It sweeps through the valley and over the hills making a great rushing sound. Rashid’s robe flaps and billows.

“Come,” says Rashid. “I don’t want you to have to stand here.”

As we leave there is the sound of a tree falling somewhere nearby. Suddenly the rubbish dump begins to crumble. The wind is separating all its elements with great speed. I think I see rose petals flying through the air and my heart moves in surprise, but then I realize they are really pink, translucent onion skins rising high in the wind. After that there come cooked rice grains stained with gravy, a child’s broken umbrella that opens as it travels sideways over our heads, a woman’s torn slipper with a dangling heel.

“We should go inside,” Rashid says, but he keeps walking, narrowing his eyes against the wind, and bending his head slightly.

“Yes,” I say, but I only put my dupatta more securely around my head.

We reach the arched gate.

A large piece of broken mirror comes flying over the gate. It moves in a long arc, slowly, and then falls into the patch of green that Rashid tends, shattering immediately, throwing up tiny pieces of glass which settle on the bushes and plants like glistening dew. The wind swirls with rinds, shells, peels, everything whose insides have been eaten, it swirls with things torn, broken, crushed, pulverized, each thing without breath or destiny.

“I am sorry I told you these mausoleums are five hundred years old,” Rashid says. Orange peels, mango stones, coloured threads, used rags, and a battered toy car travel by. Cooked rice grains coloured yellow deposit themselves on his hair, and a chicken bone with some flesh still on it slowly slides down his right shoulder.

“The truth is I don’t really know.”

“There is rice in your hair,” I say. I step closer and stand facing him.

Matchsticks rain down on us. Rashid does not look at me, he looks at the night. I begin to remove each grain from his hair. Some of the grains are stuck to his scalp. I have to hold them between my fingertips and slide them down the strand of hair to which it clings. It takes me a long time. I brush off a few matchsticks. Garlic peels float around us, looking like petals of jasmine.

The traveler may expect ruins, but not debris, not refuse. Nevertheless, he stands firm in a storm, even a tornado of rubbish. What can fell him is his need for love.

“Even this wind is on its way somewhere else,” Rashid says. “Just passing through...”

What can fell the traveler are a few truly spoken words.

A black flower with its long petals drooping downwards, separated from the night only by its shape, moves across the darkness, spinning twice, before falling near our feet. It is a banana skin, blackened by decay. Night has taken away all the sharpness of this landscape, covering the scrub and the thorns and the barren hills, endowing it with a gentleness it does not have in the day. I look at the land's other self. At the bottom of the hills the night is most dense as it huddles together with branches and thorns and unknown things that move only in these dark depths. The hills themselves have become continuous undulating shapes. At their ridge hill becomes sky only through a difference in tones. The hills are dense night, impenetrable, and the sky dark but with an infinite transparency. Far above, there are stars. They are more than beautiful.

The wind has brought massed clouds that move over the sky, and every time they appear the darkness deepens below. The mausoleums become part of the night when the clouds come, and become themselves again after the clouds have gone. Under the moving clouds I recognise the thin shapes of the boys, one of them brandishing a stick in his hand, lunging at the stormy air filled with useless things, perhaps, who knows, even at the stars.

I do not know any more whether to admire endurance or despise it, in another, and most of all, in myself. When is it that endurance turns infinite, and if it is infinite is it still endurance? The stars will not quench my questions. But they will do from afar what night and human love will do from nearby, make gentle the rough, make smooth the sharp, make invisible for a while that which does not have to always be under the light.

A dead bird comes flying, the wind forcing its wings open but not its eyes, and spreading its tail in a fan. It hits the ground at our feet. It is a dead fan-tailed robin.

Rashid scoops up the fallen bird in his hands.

“Here, take it. My gift to you.”

I cannot bring myself to take the bird in my hands.

“Touch it,” he says.

I shake my head.

His jaw hardens. He holds my wrist and forces my palm down on the bird. It is the softest thing I have touched in a very long time.

“Why do you want to give me a bird that is dead?”

“There are live birds everywhere. Anyone can give you one of those.”

We bend our heads, gather in our bodies, and go back to the dargah. I am holding the bird in my hands. The wind has forced open the old wooden door of the dargah and inside the spotless room there are now balls of hair, feathers and dust. I stand outside. Rashid looks at it all and steps in. He picks up a broom. A great exhaustion passes over his body and face.

“I asked you to come because I wanted to tell you,” he says. “What you saw here this afternoon is seen only rarely. And that only by travelers, people passing through. Never by anyone who lives here.” His face begins to tremble. “Was there a dagger of light?”

I nod my head.

Rashid turns away. The sweeping begins.

I walk away with the dead bird in my hands. The clouds will pass by leaving the land bereft not of rain, but of movement. The storm will pass by without cleansing, and everything it has pried loose will have no choice but to settle again, into the depths of this still landscape. So too this bird which I must leave in a place protected from the wind. I do not want it to be forced up into the air again. As I keep holding it my aversion ebbs. What it offers most are feelings of flight, of rising, of breath. That is what it offers to one who is still alive.

The day after the storm, the sweepers are gathering the scattered rubbish into small heaps. All morning there is the sound of sweeping brooms over rock and stone and soil. Tired from the beginning, the sweepers pass over things, pieces of newspaper, a small chunk of meat. The onion skins escape them so easily that they lie scattered everywhere, as naturally as fallen leaves.

Exhausted, the sweepers sleep at noon inside the dark mausoleums, or in the large, deep shadow cast by a rock. There are coloured shreds of plastic bags impaled on a tree of thorns, drooping downwards, irredeemable leaves on destitute branches. Among them hangs my dupatta, soiled and torn, one end wrapped around a large thorn, the other lying on the ground. In the patch of green that Rashid tends, the white flowers lie crumpled and torn on the soil, along with the stalks that held them, covered by bits of glass that glitter in the sun. In the ruins of a mosque the boys play cricket with tiny plastic balls and wooden sticks.

I discover Saleem, standing before a wooden cart piled with fruit. Incense sticks burn on top of the pile. I approach him from behind and he does not see me. As I am walking up to him I see him take an incense stick and burn a hole

in a papaya, then in an apple. He takes another stick, lights it and continues with the other fruit. Every few minutes he lights the stick again. The ground below the cart is strewn with fruit peels, seeds, and matchsticks. I reach the cart and he immediately arranges the incense sticks back on top of the pile. The fruit are all jumbled up together, bananas on top of papayas, oranges and mangoes squashed next to each other. Every single fruit is pock marked with holes. I ask him what the holes are. "Insects," he says, looking directly into my eyes. The holes are tiny, but from them squeeze forth drops of juice, orange, yellow and white. Large black flies hover overhead and lunge at the holes when they can.

It is not only the holes that bring the flies. Each fruit is decomposing, in its own way, at its own pace. The banana is the simplest, with its evenly blackening skin. The papaya more complex, nuanced, in some places becoming a deeper orange, in others acquiring small grey sores, in still others developing large grey black patches. The sweet lime is losing its green and becoming golden like early morning light. Dark brown slowly covers the pear like an unexpected shadow. And in certain places every fruit has begun to give in, losing its precision, caving inwards towards its centre, others fleeing away from their cores and inflating till the skin tears to reveal putrefied flesh. My eyes fill with tears. I wait a while to make sure that the tears do not reach beyond the edges of my eyes.

"Can I have a papaya? One without insect holes?"

Saleem looks through the three papayas he has.

"No, none that the insects haven't touched."

"Alright I'll take one anyway."

He wraps it in a soiled newspaper and hands it to me. As I give him the money he touches my open palm and begins to caress it. He looks and looks at my palm as if he is studying its lines.

"The softest thing I have ever touched..." he says. He goes on and on till I feel compelled to take my hand away.

"Why?" he asks.

I shake my head.

He looks at me. I turn my eyes away.

Then he turns his back to me. He kneels down amidst the fruit peels and shells and begins to pray. I watch him for a few moments and then turn to look at the brown hills and the empty sky. How brown the hills are and how empty the sky. I find nothing on which my eyes can rest.

"The sun," Saleem says, suddenly standing behind me. "It burns my patience to ashes."



We are on one of the upper levels of the old fort, Rashid and I. Through the stone arches we look out at the land. Across and around us are the brown hills, and because they are low they do not interrupt the endless sky. The hills are brown, the sky without colour, the light static. It is distance and space that are the forces here, they offer themselves for consideration. Down below, the mausoleums, the dargah and the few houses attain a kind of fearlessness which I have missed in them face to face. They challenge the difficult land. Rashid says he comes up here sometimes, because it is the opposite of down below. One needs also the opposite of what one lives. He imagines that the old hunter gatherers needed to stay in one place sometimes to understand the long work of growth and flowering, and the very precise consolation that lies in recurrence. And farmers needed to leave those consolations sometimes so that they met an unexpected light, a surprising soil. Perhaps lovers need hate and anger and destruction. Not that he knows for certain, he has never been in love. So he comes here, he says, away from his daily life where everything is close, the tomb upon which he rests his head and prays, the flowers that he waters and grows, the worshippers he must bless, the dust under his feet, the food that he cooks and then eats. Up here, how can he explain it, the air and space lighten his responsibility to himself. He has come to believe that is one of the reasons the sky exists. Here both his amplex of time and his solitude become enormous, and precisely because of that he understands the harsh, unforgettable gifts that they bring. Up here, he never despises his life.

Rashid sits at an arch and looks out. I walk from arch to arch and what I see does not change. Brown hills, a sky without colour, a sky without colour, brown hills. Suddenly in one arch I come upon the flank of a hill, very close. It has small green shrubs growing on it, and in between the shrubs I think I can see a bird moving. From where I stand I am very close to the middle of the hill. After the hill the landscape falls away again, in its usual emptiness. The nearness of this hill changes things. That bird moving in the shrubs is a parrot. What is near can be relied upon in a different way than what is far. The parrot's perturbed call tears at the deep silence. This hill is unconditional, a natural truth. Darkness advances towards us across the sky, and blurs the contours of everything. The hill becomes a looming form rising out of the evening, and I only a human shape. The hill offers its dark flank for me to stroke. My hand moves over the hardness of its rock, the sharpness of its green scrub, though it does not. My palm is scratched by a point in the rock, soothed by the parrot's back, entered by the tip of a thorn in the scrub. I could also lay my head upon the flank if I needed, and recount my fears to the hill. After all, both of us know how to endure. There is an equivalence here which thought cannot recognise.

The traveler knows that the landscape is never a metaphor, it does not stand for something else, but only for itself. He watches the land, and himself. He watches himself moving through the land. It is watching that he trusts. He is not an explorer. His courage is of unknown provenance.

When darkness has rendered the hill almost invisible I walk back to the arch I have left behind and find Rashid lying on the ground. I touch him on the shoulder and slowly he opens his eyes. He looks as if he has been sleeping. A smile, of sorrow and shyness together, passes over his face. You must have been very tired, I say. He shakes his head. It is the longing for a hand, he says. He speaks so softly that I have to kneel down next to his face. On his head a hand, stroking, he says. And he has to sit down, wherever he is, he has to turn away from tomb, sky, horizon, towards himself. He can feel how the hand would begin at his forehead, touching the bare skin. Then it would cross the forehead lightly, coming onto the hair and the head. This crossing would be significant, because the hand on the forehead was only a beginning, a concentrated anticipation. Only when it came onto the head would he feel he had been really touched. It was a hand of extreme personal attachment, unconditional. The hand would bring alive the roots of his hair, his scalp. This aliveness would permeate beneath to the inside of the head. Now his blood and breath would begin to move, going down all the way till his feet, and then come back up again. The hand would stop at the hollow where the head ended and the neck began. It would return to the forehead and begin over again. Over and over and over, till everything that lay inside him without moving, these awakened and rose, and he felt freed from the stillness of this

landscape, and its extension, the stillness of his soul. But there is no such hand.

Rashid did not know what exactly happened after the longing overtook him. Often it came at a moment like today when he felt he had located the meaning of his solitariness, that he was learning at last to love time. He would find himself lying in the place where the longing had come, his body overcome by exhaustion. When he opened his eyes the universe seemed more distant, more slow, and without the capacity to inflict pain.

When we walk down the steep, winding stairs of the ancient fort in the gathering darkness, the bats flying over our heads, Rashid refuses my arm as anchor.

Down below the boys have finished their day long game of cricket. We can see them as we walk down the hill. It almost seems like they are waiting for us. An animal howl cuts the still air. We reach the boys and see that they are throwing stones at a dog, as brown as the gravel and the hills. Is there no other colour here? The dog howls and cowers, but it does not run away. In the eyes of the boys there is boredom, time needing to be killed, perhaps time is the dog that is howling. The spectrum of their eyes is narrow, moving from resignation to boredom at times, only sometimes reaching the edge of melancholy. There is nothing that they love, man or animal or landscape. Again, they hit the dog with a stone, it howls and howls, moves only a little, but does not run away.

“They are not boys,” Rashid tells me, “they are men, stunted and deformed.”

He enters the circle they have made and picks up the dog in his arms and takes him away. The boys barely look at him. Their eyes are on me, a boredom lightly interrupted.

I walk away from them, their eyes on my back.

On another continent, very far from here, there is a small town. On its edge is an ocean, never anxious, never tired, and so clear and blue that one can see the coral and the weeds below. The cliffs that surround it are green with trees, flowers climb the walls of houses, and on the hillsides away from the ocean, the sun, never too harsh, looks after the rosemary and basil growing among yellow wildflowers. There is no poverty here at all, of beauty or material need. There are young boys here too, alone or in groups, riding a skateboard, taking home a loaf of warm bread, with an identical look of resignation in their eyes. The new eludes these boys in a different way.

The next morning when the sun has spread itself evenly over everything and I am walking towards the dargah, I see the boys standing outside the gate. They

have surrounded Rashid. I can see one of them pushing him with a force that throws Rashid backwards and down on the ground. They look down at him as he picks himself up slowly. The dog that Rashid had taken with him yesterday, stands next to him and weeps. The boys move closer. They are as laconic now as always. There is utter silence among them. As I begin to run towards them one of the boys raises a wooden stick and brings it down on Rashid's right shoulder. I reach him and see the blood blackening his green robe. They push him again and this time when he hits the ground he does not get up. His eyes are shut. Saleem comes up from behind the boys and I know that he has been watching everything. Now he picks up Rashid in his arms. The boys say nothing. Perhaps, for them, each action is perfectly equal to another, the stoning of a dog, the beating of a man, a conversation, a game of cricket, the beaten man being carried away. Saleem takes Rashid inside, to his room. I am about to enter the room when a woman rushes in before me, weeping. It is the woman I had seen sitting with Rashid at the dargah. Immediately Saleem comes out and says to me, "Please come back later. We will take care of him."

I wait outside the arched gate all day, sitting on a rock. It is the first time that I have sat under the open sky like this, for so long. The sun reaches its zenith over me as it does over tree or house or hill and then declines. A man walks in with a bag. He seems to be a doctor. After an hour he walks out again. I try and read his face for signs, but ask him nothing. He looks at me as everyone does here, with curiosity but also with a knowledge of my irrelevance. At the hour of sunset I hear a song coming from the top of the hill. Once again I cannot tell whether it is a song of prayer or of love. The traveler knows that cause is a false home. That if you begin to unravel the cause of anything it will not be like a thought or a cloth but like a river at its source which has just begun to flow and very soon will carry along all that it meets on its way, flowers, corpses, and gods.

Saleem comes out.

"You can come in now, he's better."

I go in to Rashid's room, already bathed in the white light that he has fought against and lost. He is lying on a low bed, and the woman is sitting next to him on the ground. She looks at me and does not ever seem to take her eyes away. I sit down on the opposite side. Before I can say anything, Rashid says, "I'm alright. Please don't be worried."

I nod and sit silently for some time, as silent as I had been on the rock outside. The room has nothing except a clay pitcher of water, a steel glass, a Koran and a prayer mat, so old and knelt on that only some broken outlines of the original image are left.

"Is it very painful," I ask?

"Yes, but bearable."

I stand on my knees and put my hand on Rashid's forehead. It is burning with fever. I begin stroking it.

"Do you see how we live here? Between prayer and slaughter."

I nod my head again. Across the bed, the woman is weeping quietly. I know why. I walk across to her side of the bed and sit next to her. She turns sideways to look at me, surprised. I take her hand and place it on Rashid's forehead. She takes it away so quickly it is as if she had touched fire. She begins to weep even more and without looking at anyone, leaves the room.

"You shouldn't have done that," he says. "She's a married woman."

I close my eyes. "You have lived too long with ruins, with tombs," I tell him.

"And what," he says, "would you have us do?"

There are tears in Rashid's eyes.

"That is not what I meant to say..." I begin.

He nods his head, but the tears have crossed the edges of his eyes.

I put my hand back on his forehead. He puts his hand on mine that is on his forehead. Slowly, he falls asleep.

The light inside the dargah is on. I hear a sound of tearing cloth. When I reach the dargah I see the woman sitting at the threshold. She has my ruined, torn dupatta in her hand. It is stained with dirt and torn in places. The woman tears the cloth with her teeth at one edge. She is still crying. Her teeth are small, pointed and sharp. She rips it all the way down to the other end. She attacks the cloth with a fierceness far greater than what the cloth deserves, in the way that women sometimes do, unleashing their grievous anger onto the most helpless, inanimate thing. She tears the cloth into the thinnest strips. Slowly she stops crying. The sound of tearing cloth becomes softer, slower, less discordant.

"It was already soiled and torn by the storm," she says to me. "I didn't think you would want it back."

"Do the boys ever come to the dargah?" I ask.

"No. They don't need to yet," she says. "But they will, sooner or later. What else is there?"

A group of ten men have come to pray at the dargah. After their prayers they move backwards slowly. They look over their left shoulder every few moments to make sure they will not stumble against anything behind them. But that looking does not distract them. When they turn back towards the room's dark opening, their faces are as quiet, their eyes steadfast. I know, as surely as something proven, that this ritual comes from a very true source. I too have

finished my time at the dargah and walk backwards. But I am less practiced than the men. So I have to stop and steady myself every so often. The boys appear from behind the dargah and watch us all. They have their back to the room with the tomb. As we go back, they come forward, facing us. The men do not seem to notice. We go back, the boys come forward, till we all reach the arched gate. If one passes on rituals one must also pass on a fragment of the immensity that produced them. The boys keep coming forward, one of them repeatedly throwing the wooden stick between his two hands.

I stop outside the gate. The boys stop in front of me. They are looking at me, but their eyes keep moving to other things, and coming back to my face, my body. They can rest at nothing, these eyes, not the hills, the sky, or a person's face. Perhaps, for them, there has never been anything worth looking at.

From Sub-continent, a novel in progress

Photographs by Namit Arora