CREATIVE NONFICTION

The Courtyard or A Man Named Victorious

Reema Rajbanshi

The News

I

The papers that did not report my cousin's death might have said this. Rubul Das died November 26, 2012 in Lakhimpur, a town at the edge of Assam, a state at the edge of India. He was thirty-five, a civil engineer, husband for a year and a half, father to a son of five months, son to a cancer survivor of nearly eighty, blood to two brothers and a sister, friend to the laborers who walked miles to honor him. At the Dhemaji hospital where he was pronounced dead on arrival, the doctors wrote that he'd had a heart attack. At the Lakhimpur pharmacy where his driver had rushed him, he was given painkillers and an antacid. His body was brought back to my uncle's Mirza courtyard in a plastic bag.

The relatives I met on my week-long December trip to Assam told me this. His older sister said: *I touched his face to be sure he had died. They had cut his forehead so that blood ran out. Our father, his wife stood on the side of the courtyard, looking away.* His closest brother said: *I went to the post-mortem and looked into his open chest. His lungs were black, his heart and ribs covered with fat. I don't understand how this happened.* His mother said: *I told him so many times, don't eat so much meat, take your pressure pills, but I couldn't save him. In such old age, did such bad days have to come?* His father said: *They left him alone on a sofa in the pharmacy and found him with foam coming from his mouth. The one who should have died is me but the one who died was him. He must have been destined to end like this.*

I will begin telling you about my cousin like this. I called him Rubul Dada, Older Brother Rubul, but everyone else who loved him called him Ranjeet. Which means there were many people who called him He Who Wins in War.

II

My mother had given me the news over the phone, calling from the Bronx, New York to La Jolla, California. I did not expect my own sobbing, between my low bed and papasan, my stuffing a gamoosa into my mouth.

"Reema," my mother said after a few minutes, "Reema. Listen. They already cremated him, but someone should go to Mirza."

I went beach-running, but all that sand and moon and mansion sank my spirits. I gloomed out at the curling dark tide, which had washed over the eastern archipelago of rocks and anemone, and prayed for my cousin's spirit. As I shuffled back to the pavement, I crossed an older white couple sitting on the divider between sand and lot, and the woman motioned to me. "Come here."

I stood warily, barefoot on the boardwalk, and said, "What is it?"

"I just want to ask you a question," the woman said. "Are you peaceful?"

I could barely make her out in the moonlight, and the man kept his back to me, but I laughed. "I hope so."

She waved me over again. I waited.

"We were just talking," she said, "about our relatives. You see, they were complaining that they're only worth two million dollars. Well, we're only worth five hundred thousand." She stepped towards me, smiling. "What would you have said to them?"

I thought of my cousin, foaming in the back of a car, and took another step back. "I'd say money isn't everything. Money can't buy happiness or love or longevity."

"Money isn't everything," the woman beamed. "Money can't buy happiness."

"If it makes you feel better," I said, turning to go. "You're worth more than I'll ever be or people I know."

The man turned. "We're also a lot older than you are."

You are, I thought bitterly. The woman looked ready to speak but I began walking away. "At least," I waved, "you've got great company. I wouldn't worry about it."

Back in my room, I listed the passport and visa I would need for a return I had not imagined. Eight and a half years earlier, I'd visited India on a year-long college fellowship to research family history. In the years after, I had left New York for California, patching together a

writing life in what felt like another country. Now, I was returning to the Old, my first book undone, my mother home from a mastectomy, my sister three months pregnant, my father too close to seventy to go alone. I guessed at other questions that would greet me on that other shore: *Reema, what did you write of that year? Reema, why did it take you so long to return? Reema, how could this have happened?*

III

All day as I waited in Indian airports—Delhi, Kolkota, Guwahati—the TV showed Delhi protests. A young woman named Damini had been gang-raped in Delhi, one of many rapes unresolved by police, but this time, Delhi exploded. Women in saris and salwars shouted in streets, holding up signs that read "Death Penalty for Rape," "We Want Justice." The Gate of India had been surrounded by furious men and women, and they in turn had been surrounded by police. Protestors were arrested; the rapists were not caught; Damini died a few days later. In each airport, closer and closer to my cousin's bone, the TVs glowed orange-red with flames in spare, fluorescent rooms.

A few months later, at a Toronto panel, where I spoke on the witch-hunting of Rabha women in Assam and Meghalaya, I listened to two other writers who had grown up in Northeast India. The non-tribal writer spoke about Irom Sharmila, a Manipuri activist who had been fasting against AFSPA in the Northeast. The tribal writer spoke about various Naga and Khasi poets who'd written about the insurgencies. Both spoke to the frequency of rape in Delhi, in India; and we all spoke about Damini, whose name meant lightning, which had been given by the public because her case had drawn so much attention.

One writer, turning in the golden light of the café, said suddenly, *it's one thing to theorize about this, it's another to live it. You have no idea.*

Which is true in part: I can only speak for who I was, traveling for a year through Northeast India on fellowship, and who I'd become, nine years later, saying goodbye to the cousin who'd wanted to ensure I would have no idea about violences I'd learn anyway.

People's Life

I

The first broadcast that went across a free India had been Nehru's, right after the British withdrew, August 14, 1947:

"Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially . . . A moment comes which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance . . . We think also of our brothers and sisters who have been cut off from us by political boundaries, and who unhappily cannot share at present in the freedom that has come. They are of us and will remain of us whatever may happen, and we shall be sharers in their good and ill fortune alike."

I had seen Nehru, in an elegant kurta with that buttonhole rose, uttering this promise as a kid in the Bronx, on some Indian TV channel. Even then, his triumphant English, the crackling bass under the repeated *tryst-pledge-freedom* made me shiver. Where was my maternal grandfather that midnight, my Ata who had been jailed by the British for being a freedom fighter, a Communist? Had my parents, my Peha and Pehi, who must have been country babes then, tingled with a whirring sense of change?

All those trysts with my cousins in their Mirza courtyard, I had not thought of Nehru's words but our own, heated in what seemed simple games. Mostly, my cousins had twisted and swung slender limbs to the rhythms of cricket, a game I learned most Indians adored, a game it seemed my cousins could master. I had to beg the boys to let me play, and when they ignored me, pitching low balls that made wobbily runs past the shed, into the back garden, I sulked on the courtyard steps. The one time they relented to my scowls, Rubul Dada pitched the ball into my jaw. Of course, I ran off wailing-all-hell, and my cousins scattered across the burning courtyard. To hide the culprit ball, to tiptoe sheepishly round the kitchen, to wait till my aunt stopped scolding from the meal table. There I sobbed, betrayed, as she patted me down with black tea, a warm towel to my swollen cheek. It was Mintu Dada who brooded over first, sitting beside me and crying at my tears. And it was Tapan Dada and Rubul Dada who went out and brought bangles back to where I curled, behind a mosquito net on their bed. *So sorry*, Rubul Dada said in English, offering in his palm the heavy cricket ball. *Take this. You hit back. But please, if you stay mad, I will feel bad.*

On my goodbye visit, I sat again on the courtyard steps, watching new boys playing cricket. Mintu Dada and Tapan Dada threw the ball to my oldest nephews, nine and four, who

kept missing and shrieking. Runuma Ba sat beside me, watching as I slumped in that courtyard, all of us steeped purple and grey in the quick-falling dusk. She thumbed through her phone and paused on a Bhupen Hazarika song I had heard growing up, a song I had not noticed was sung with his brother, Jayanta. The gentle lyrics, the husky voices took on, like that yard and sky, startling shades.

Chitralekha, Chitralekha, chitra ekhon akana. Chitrapatot chintasil ek chintanayak akana.

Chitralekha, Chitralekha, please draw a picture. On your canvas draw a thoughtful leader.

Jane jibonore rong shukula. Mane jibonore gabhi neela.

The people's life in color and white. The mind's life in deep blue.

Patra duti sajai loa. Duyoti rong milai loa.

Decorate the two pots. Mix the two colors.

Tulika tuli loana.

Please pick up the painting brush.

Eti duti rekhare, sabadhanatare

With one or two lines, carefully

nayan aka durodoroki.

Draw sharp-sighted eyes.

Onagota dinor abhinaba puwa.

Of days yet to come, an unprecedented morning

Xima aximor xima buji poa

Which understands the limits of the limitless.

Bakhya ekhon aki diya, lakhyajone lakhya powa.

Draw a heart so millions can reach their goal.

Tulika tuli loana.

II

The biggest spat Rubul Dada and I had—and we had several—erupted when we went to visit tea gardens in Upper Assam. All along the jeep ride through the gardens, green expanses on both sides, he and his friend giggled about the surprise they had in store for me. Each time I demanded they tell me what the surprise was, they knowingly glanced at each other, said, *no, she'll get scared*, then laughed again.

The surprise was that the professor had arranged a Christmas Eve visit to a Naga village. The village chief's son, who would show us around, was once a member of the insurgent outfit, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim. I wasn't scared, I thought resentfully as I huffed behind the two boys up a hill; I was unprepared—no gifts, no questions, no nothing. The village was at the top of a foothill and, on our two-hour trek there, we paused several times to gulp in air. The soil was muddy, with steps sometimes cut into it, sometimes not, so that when we slipped, our jeans were brushed with swaths of ochre. Halfway up, we came upon a gazebo, which gave us a view of the plains we had left, and the contrast between that flat tan maze and these palm-and-sun dappled hills was startling.

On our excursion back up, the chief's son met us—a slender, solemn-faced guy, in his 30s—who said we were late, he had worried, he had in fact made the up-down trip twice to find us. With our tomato faces, our sweaty limbs, we laughed. Did a revolutionary look so utterly ordinary, so surprisingly delicate?

What filters as important now about that trip is how my cousin too wandered about in wonder. Through the long log school newly built for the village children, strung up with Christmas lights and shiny paper words, where the children would also learn English. Across the field where we finally sat under a tree and watched children playing traditional games: spearing grapefruit, shooting bows, and watching us strangers back. Then settling in the drawing room of our Assamese driver, who had been our go-between, enjoying me strike up a chat with the Naga girl who spoke English.

Maybe he remembered how much ragging I'd gone through at my Guwahati hostel, mostly with the Upper Assamese tea garden girls. How only the Naga girls had befriended me, bringing hot jilabi to my room, taking me out to eat momos, watching movies together in all our rooms, whether in English or Hindi. *Look at her go*, my cousin smiled. *She's never that excited with us.* I'd rolled my eyes at him. But what I remember now is how the girl, named Seven in Sema, told me about her brother who had died in his twenties. He had contracted malaria and been taken to

Guwahati Medical, she said, where he had been given the wrong medicine. She said it so plainly, as we stood before the mound where his body had been buried.

My cousin's sister later said, to my stunned face those first few days back, *it's like a fast-forward cut in a film reel, isn't it?* Yes, except this was suddenly life and the schoolhouse lesson learned late was some of us do not walk away alive.

What I remember now too, and regret, is the essay I wrote and published, in *Luitor Pora Mississippi* in 2006, detailing that trip. I do not regret recounting the generosity of our Sema Naga hosts, the tragicomic food bumble between the professor, the other Assamese guests, the Naga chief's son, but how I had berated my cousin for letting his friend pull such a stunt without asking me.

It's my time, I had cried as my cousin slumped on a bed in the tea estate. *And my money!*

Yes, yes, he said quietly. *I'll talk to him. You're right.*

No, I would say now. *Why didn't you call me out?* Why didn't you say it's *our* stories, *our* time you're borrowing? Because look, how for no good reason, I again ended up with more of both. How that Christmas Eve, strangers took us in, tea garden girls draped a gamoosa round my neck before they danced jhumur for me, how the singer came and sang, full-throated, though he had been sick in bed for days. How I have no idea as I write this where any of you are.

III

Here are two women Rubul Dada found beautiful: Aishwarya Rai and Kareena Kapoor. He and Chintu sat in their friends' empty bedroom, on mornings we lounged about before exploring Upper Assam, and watched Bollywood films that constantly ran on TV. I slurped my spicy fried noodles on the bed while they gushed on the floor about Aishwarya, as long as a crane (and about as limber), dancing to the lemon song.

She's so lucky, my cousin said. *Born beautiful and talented and rich.*

Kareena Kapoor, he had actually seen, in his time traveling through Mumbai. We were walking through Upper Assam ruins on yet another hill when I asked what she looked like.

Very beautiful, he said, shaking his head as if it were a disturbing truth. *More beautiful than even in cinema. But it was hard to see her with the cameras around her.*

I watched him walking about the circular stone remains of Aniruddha's house. Small and dark like me, he'd always liked the tall, North-Indian looking girls. No surprise, then, when nine years later, I met his widow: a pale, willowy creature who seemed to transfer her iron grief to her dark, twisty-lipped baby.

Rubul used to say, she told me, *we'll have to pay this one ek lakh to see his smile.*

He had told me, nine years before, about a girl he had known for years, a love at first sight thing that it had taken several years of courage-and-courtship to make real, but I hadn't met her then. Goalpara was not pressing on my itinerary, and there had been violence between Assamese purists and Assamese who had absorbed some Bengali culture. Now here she was, by day solemnly bathing and nursing their son; by night, weeping over her inexplicable fate, a love of sixteen years gone, a baby of five months left, a young widow about to start a government job.

How could my cousin and I have foreseen all this, walking about one of the most fabled architectures of Assam's City of Romance? It was in Tezpur, legend has it, that the princess Ukha fell in love, in a dream, with Aniruddha, Krishna's grandson. Her artist friend, Chitralekha, cast her magic to call Aniruddha to Ukha, but Ukha's father, the Bana Raja, built a fort to keep the lovers apart.

It was in that fort, nine years ago, Rubul Dada told me about the woman he hoped would become his wife. Nine years later, it was in my uncle's courtyard, circled by a brick wall, where I walked with my cousin's widow and son.

Who is the Bana Raja in this story? Is Chitralekha real?

Boat Brothers

I

Let me tell you a story about brothers and sisters.

My mother's oldest brother was a tall, handsome guy who flitted about town, chatting up the ladies, milling with men around fires. He took his youngest sister, my mother, out to lunch to curb the disdain of the other girls, who would not speak to this astonishingly white, educated girl, and to ward off the eyes of other guys, who always asked why his sister wasn't yet married. Mama himself flirted with every tempting woman, a regular Krishna, but for whom did he save the choicest concert tickets, the latest saris, the freshest sweets?

Like this, Ma and Mama attended a concert Bhupen Hazarika gave after his own brother, Jayanta Hazarika, died at 34. My mother remembers sitting beside her brother, in the red sari he had given her, as Bhupen Hazarika sang the verses he had once sung with Jayanta. He wept as he pumped that harmonica, singing to a brother also gifted, also a drinker, but who had not made it.

How did it happen, I asked my mother. *Assamese people say it was drinking but the Internet doesn't list a cause.*

People say it was food poisoning, my mother said. *But he died in Kolkata, not Guwahati. When someone dies far away, people can say anything.*

A couple months after that concert, my uncle died. The truck he had been driving crashed and he came home not knowing his gut ache was a burst kidney. By the time he pissed blood, by the time my mother and grandmother rode with him to the hospital, he was too full of poison. He died in my mother's lap. He had had the rare love marriage, and his two girls were still infants.

When Rubul Dada died, it was the daughter-in-laws who picked up the first calls for identification; but the commissioner called Tapan Dada and that's how everyone knew it was grave. It was Tapan Dada, who had been like Rubul Dada's shadow, who learned that his other self had died. The light-skinned, green-eyed brother learned that the dark-skinned, brown-eyed brother had died. The serious, practical brother learned that the emotive, prankster brother had died. The home-bound, teacher brother learned that the roaming, engineer brother had died.

It was Tapan Dada who had called me in La Jolla, so I might speak to the driver who had come to Mirza for the last rites, an apologetic man who kept saying, *sister, I did my best*. It was Tapan Dada, curt and quiet on the phone, who read the names of the medicine the doctor had given Rubul Dada, mostly unrecognizable, mostly antacids. It was Tapan Dada who described his brother's open chest, black and fatty, as I ironed my salwar in his room.

Have you gotten the final report? I asked.

Nai powa.

Why not?

He kept watching me iron. *That's the way things are done here.*

Call me when you get it. Are you sure it was just a heart attack?

We talked about opening a case. But our father said, what's the point? That won't bring him back.

II

Sunny afternoons, my cousin's widow, Ona Bou, bathed their son, Baba, in the courtyard. She put out a tie-dye-colored plastic bin and washed him in the clear sun. A somber baby who hardly made a peep, he livened up at this excursion, splashing his paws in the water, blinking the large dark eyes that were my cousin's. Ona Bou seemed easier in these moments too, smiling once in a while, waving at me to come closer, snap a pic.

I had taken many pics, nine years earlier, of Runuma Ba's son, the first baby born to my four Mirza cousins. I was the one with the Pentax, the nebulous aim of writing about Northeast India, and here he was, this lotus-eyed babe as round as a frog, as prized as life. So I'd shot him, Baba then too, as the Assamese call their baby boys, as my cousin had always been called by his family: taking his first bath, in his naming ceremony, watching his first bihu, that dance of our new year. Bhindeu, my brother-in-law, stood patiently in so many of these pics, eyes shining as he held up his son. But in these new photos, my cousin was the ghost, the one who should have been there, instead of his widow with her pink eyes, his brothers with their grave faces, my uncle with his sudden gaunt frame.

The other three boys felt it too, though only the oldest, the Baba of nine years before, understood. Mintu Dada's nine-year old son was the chatty one who had taken a liking to me, bringing me back half his school lunch, visiting me in my room to try my fingerless gloves, my lotion, my comb. He was the one who leaned over the baby's crib and declared—*your father's not coming back, did you know that?*—till my cousin scolded him away. The other boy, only two, looked like a Kochari with his tipped eyes and moon face, and unfortunately, acted like the tribal stereotype. Whatever you want to call it, naughtiness or daring, he ran everywhere, tumbling down those steps, wailing over egg-sized lumps before he tried climbing out a window or swashbuckling a knife longer than he was.

But my sister-in-laws loved those babies so hard, never spanking them, hugging them as if that would help them breathe, letting them run free, free, free. The rare time they put the Kochari in the bamboo crib in the courtyard, he screamed as if his life depended on it, and I joked that he was crying *Azadi! Mujhe azadi jahiye! Freedom! I want freedom!* Which made me wonder, glancing at the bedroom where either Ona Bou or Baba would cry, can you love someone hard

enough for two? Would Baba learn to stay quiet or to scream? Would he always be different, and did he already sense why?

The only origin story that became clear was this: my cousin's home name, Rubul, had been given by my Communist uncle after the Russian currency. That when Rubul Dada had been born, my uncle had been hopeful, in an India about as old and independent as my cousin would be when he died in it.

III

On a 2003 bus ride out from Majuli, once the world's largest river island, I sat beside an Assamese man who asked me about my trip. I told the stranger about visiting a Mising village, about going into a sang-ghar (a traditional tribal house built on sticks above the river), about bargaining for hand-woven shawls, about photographing two Mising women, one young and beautiful, the older one's defined cheekbones and nut-brown skin reminding me of my grandmother's face.

What do you think, the stranger asked, *aren't they pigs?* I started at his bluntness, even though I expected this in India, but still . . . really?

Their homes are cleaner than Guwahati's, I said.

He squinted at me, the way I'd sometimes seen Upper Assamese or general assholes do when I flipped the script. *Traitor!* (Which I'd heard.) *Kochari!* (Which I'd also heard.)

What is important now about that conversation is how, the next time I'd see a sang ghar, it would be to honor a more dire crossing. My sister-in-laws wanted to commission for me a metalwork picture of a sang ghar, but carrying that memory felt impossible. Rubul Dada and I had sat together in the Majuli sang ghar's shaded bedroom, over a delicate floor through which we could see the hungry river. He had sat haggling with the Mising boy who'd brought us there, while I'd nagged Rubul Dada to leave it alone, to let them take whatever price they could get.

Even this one flash of firmness from my cousin seemed funny, he who had mocked things more than usual on that first river crossing. He had mocked our auto-rickshaw driver who, when the rickety auto chortled to a stop, knelt on the ground and prayed to the auto god. He had mocked the sinuous bamboo bridge that was the only visible way to cross a sudden tributary flanked by heavy trees. We stood, me-my cousin-his loud friend, gazing out at this exquisite antiquity.

Let's go, I said, setting a foot on that bridge.

Bye, my cousin said cheerily. *And when you fall into the middle of that water, I'll be standing here waving. Bye!*

He mocked the satra members who woke, every chilly morning, at six to bathe in icy water. *No heating,* he announced to me that first morning. *Wake up and experience the authentic Assam!*

When I made a face and mumbled I'd rather wait, he pinched his nose and said, *oh-ho-ho, you want everyone to be saying, who is that pretty, stinky girl?*

But he didn't mock me when, on the way back, we ran into a Spanish couple who could speak neither English nor a single Indian language, but whose navigational phrase was *I love India!* Good enough for my cousin, who grinned *yeaahhh,* gave a thumbs up, and said, *we love India too!* So I spoke slowly in Portuguese to this couple who spoke slowly in Spanish. We spoke about Vaishnav Hinduisim's founder, Sankar Dev; we spoke about how Indians picked up quickly on foreigners, but differently; for the blonde, blue-eyed Spaniard, he'd been touched and questioned, the object of fascination; for his brunette girlfriend, she'd been shepherding them like a determined pilgrim through this other holy land; for me, who got derided on the street by boys who called me an Assamese pretending to be American, till I opened my mouth; we spoke about new year's rituals, how the Spanish put twelve grapes in their mouths for each midnight stroke, how the Assamese celebrated by another calendar entirely, in the spring and for a whole month, but burned tall huts and ate pithas for January's Magh Bihu. The whole time, my cousin, who spoke Assamese, English, Hindi, and other Indian languages, but not these European ones, watched me with his eyes shining.

But it is my cousin's crossing, not to that eroding island but away from it, that has made me feel, most unexpectedly, the Portuguese word *saudade.* How you can miss something with deep blueness, how you can learn only in missing how much you loved, so that months later you will be driving in sunny San Diego and suddenly, for the long pause of a red light, you weep, the water your cousin threatened washing your face.

Destiny

I

Back in my San Diego apartment, cross-legged in a square of sun, I sat typing in a sudden FB chat with a Guwahati friend. He had visited my Mirza week, sitting in the drawing room and sipping tea while my uncle and his own father talked about the political and economic rubble of Assam. Eight years earlier, I had sat with Rubul Dada in drawing rooms much like that one, in Assam, in Arunachal, and had listened about other boys lost to war or poverty or drugs. I had not imagined I would be hearing my cousin's name among theirs.

Over FB, across oceans, my Guwahati friend launched into what he had held back in that drawing room. *You have to write*, he said, *about the real India.*

I'm trying, I said.

Now with the Delhi protests, he said, *the world will see how sick this place is.*

You mean the rapes?

Everything. The only way to survive here is to be corrupt. Good people either end up begging on the road or dead.

II

The third night of my *goodbye* visit, my eldest cousin, Mintu Dada, scootered me and his four-year-old son to a nearby kabadi game. A wrestling game of touch-me-not, marked by a simple chalk line, I had first played this in my uncle's courtyard. It had seemed alarmingly raw—no props, not much strategy, just the brute agility of your body—and I always lost. That night, at least a hundred boys scuffled across rectangles chalked off in a green school field. Though these teenagers strutted up and down, wrangled and thumped limbs and heads, they seemed so unjustly outweighed that I found the spectacle, through all the kicked-up dust, disturbing.

Mintu Dada led us to the front row, where I gripped my nephew on my lap, first before a game of Tongla versus Silchar, then before a game of Mongoldoi versus Nalbari. The boys tussled hard, cheered on by their mates, and sometimes crashed out of the rectangle right into our row. Not only was the game removed from the American imagery of hulking footballers, tall tennis players, it was like an easy array of the Northeast's bewildering diversity. There were the tribal boys of Tongla, perhaps Bodo, against the Bengali boys of Silchar. There were the Upper

Oxomiya boys of Mongoldoi, perhaps some Ahom among them, against the Lower Oxomiya of Nalbari, not far from my parents' hometowns. Of course, there must have been somebody on each team to throw out easy essentializing, to point to how much we moved to-and-fro across lines, like the wild skidding of kabadi.

On the way back to his scooter, my cousin talked about being Koch. *You know that's what we are, right?* he said. *Of course,* I said. It had been one of the unforgettable discoveries of my fellowship year. He expanded on how we were part of that indigenous group but that some of us, like my father's family, had been mainstreamed into Assamese society. *There are still Rajbongsis*, he said, *who speak their own language. But not us*, he laughed, tossing his son onto the scooter. *We've become Assamese.* I could understand why, thinking of so many groups in so many places who had made this choice. *But*, he said as he waited for me to get on behind his son, *the mark is still there.*

Back before I understood this history, Rubul Dada had seemed like any player on that field. More clearly now, he had been the trickster Dada at whom I raged even as I craved his attention. The Dada who had eyes so large and lashed, they looked like a girl's. The Dada who loved eggplant, as I did, eating it any way my Pehi made it: sliced and fried with turmeric, or mashed with mustard oil, onion, and cilantro, or grilled and spiced alongside river fish fritters, mopping it all with his expressive hands. The Dada who always wore his button-down shirts outside his pants, so that they seemed nighties on his small frame, with the long sleeves rolled up, just as my father wore them. The Dada who clowned so incessantly, teasing me about my accent, my looks, my temper till I blew up, yet who ran to the well to hide his tears as I was about to leave for the airport. The Dada who made his parents and mine brag about his engineering job, the first on his father's side to mix and stay in the middle class after centuries of farming land that had once been Kochari but had then been owned by upper-caste zamindaars. The Dada who had spoken more languages than us all, seen more of India than we had, a cosmopolitanism Northeasterners were assumed too shy, too poor to do. Yet he had, like my father and uncles, tried to go back, something Oxomiya people, even if they won't say so, couldn't overlook. Rubul Dada was loyal and loyalty, as Northeasterners know, is a material and mystifying mark of love.

III

Maybe it boils down to accidents all along. If I had been born not to my father but to my aunt, the sibling who was pulled out early from school because she was a girl, she was needed at home, she was to be married, and if my cousin had been in my stead, would he be alive? Would I?

My father, on my return, said fondly as he washed the dishes, how my aunt had had the sharpest memory of them all. How she hadn't wanted to leave school at all. I told him, as I tore the crumpled kolasapori pitha he had made, how she had wanted to learn to read English while I was there. How she had remembered my long feet and long nose as a baby. How she had recited the story of me being *botmas*, at three imitating a neighbor who'd daily call the lame villager to eat. My cousin had had my aunt's twinkly humor, though his was laced with a boy's jabs. How many times had we fought, him fuming and muttering off to his room, me throwing myself sullenly onto a hard bed? He resented me, I knew: the luxury of my rage, what must have seemed my unearned coldness, when he'd had to deploy far more charm to approach half the things I was given. He adored my sister, I knew: she who laughed at his tricks, she who was fair and floaty the way he liked, she who was always game to ride behind him as he scootered off from friend to friend on dirt roads.

The last week of that goodbye trip, my uncle took me into the drawing room alone and told me this last story of my cousin's love for my sister: how he had been so excited to meet her and her husband, a Goan-American who'd never been to Assam, that he'd talked about taking them to Kaziranga. Kaziranga, Assam's famous wildlife park for riding an elephant to spot the tigers, the rhinos, is a place we'd all gone to together; though we hadn't gotten the elephant ride that winter because, as was typical in India, some "VIPs had come that day and wanted them." My sister had hung a photo of her and Rubul Dada, hands on hips, mugging before the bulbous red sunset.

He was supposed to go there, my uncle said, *the week he died. He had made plans to be there, but when your sister cancelled coming, he went to work instead.*

I mentioned this to my sister, who said, *yes, it's been a long time, but I have sweet memories of him.*

I didn't tell her what my uncle said, for which I had no reply. *So I think, if your sister cancelled, if your parents couldn't come, then this was his destiny.*

Consolatio

I

The image that encircles my nine-year story is this: a boy, clearly American with his new sneakers and black suitcase and lanky limbs, hunched on an airport chair. That Oxomiya cloth, the red-and-white bordered gamoosa, was draped around his neck, as it is done warmly for all *good mornings,* all *goodbyes*. He was sobbing into the embroidered end, his face hidden from his relatives, who circled him, wordless.

II

The last event my cousin photographed with his family was Diwali, that pan-Indian Hindu festival of lights. In the photos, he had alighted sakis on a banana tree someone had brought into the courtyard. There he stood, on the very side of that courtyard where, weeks later, his body would be bagged. He smiled before a tier of lights that promised to call Lakshmi, the open-armed goddess of wealth who sits upon a lotus, before elephants who shower the land with coins.

It was with my cousin's camera that I photographed the one-month rite commemorating his passing. It was through the lens he once used that I saw his family gathered in two rows under a yellow canopy, to listen to the townspeople who had come to read the Geeta. Strangely, it wasn't a dismal affair: the day was fresh and bright, the yellow canopy filtering swaths of light, even through the smoke. Everyone wore light cotton clothes, styled in the simple Sankari way, and the middle sister-in-law had wrapped her own mekhla around me. The bhokot, a shiny-faced man who looked much younger than seventy, read passages I couldn't follow—but his rhythm was measured, as if reading a poem, and every now and then he paused to ask the audience a question. Folks answered openly, even joked, and a yellow butterfly flitted all afternoon between ground and canopy, between canopy and sky.

My uncle, that old Marxist, stood off to the side, and I rose beside him to photograph the scene: women sifting the raw rice and chickpeas for Prasad, smoke rising from chips in a low stand, my cousin's wife, his mother, the bhokot in a tier of anxious faces. Still, I couldn't photograph some things: my uncle, that old Marxist, who stood off to the side, all of us prostrating at the end of the courtyard, where the body had not been, even my uncle kneeling in prayer. And that yellow butterfly on that strangely peaceful day, flitting between ground and canopy, between canopy and sky.

III

I am angry that it took me nine years to return, and that I will never see you again in this fucked state of affairs. I am angry that you ate yourself to death, and left us too shaken to read the body you left. I am angry that there was no one to treat you when your heart seized, that being in the wrong place at the wrong time helped kill you. I am angry at all the policies, all the histories that dictated you would die early in an outpost of an outpost. I am angry that, given the insurgency and corruption in the Northeast, we cannot be certain it wasn't foul play. I am angry that I had to hold, one by one, your weeping family in my arms. Your mother who has my father's face. Your father who outlived the zamindars but may not outlive this. Your stunned widow who handed me your son in the courtyard. Your sister who said over and over, *I can't believe I'll never see him again.*

I am angry that I ever imagined you would escape the ruthlessness of circumstance, that instead, I am writing this. I am angry that you were not there, slight and dark and glossy-eyed behind the glass of Lokhinath Bordoloi Airport, waiting for me. All those trips across continents and you were always, always there. I am angry that I cannot chew you out again for a joke or cricket ball gone too far, resent you for preferring my sister to me—things that were my right as your *bhonti*, what you yourself called me. I am angry that I could not say *good morning*, as I did to everyone on this *good bye* trip, to you who were the most promising of the house. The one who got to leave Assam, the one who chose to go back, the one who had had many choices. I am angry, I am angry, and there you are in the bamboo reed in the shed. You who will be given back to the Ganga, and neither my belly fire nor anyone else's can retrieve you from time or pump back your blood or spark you up to us, whole and sure of a boy.