


Pain, fear, pleasure, togetherness, anger, resignation... a description of the myriad emotions that define one word... love. A collage of events, both past and present, is woven together with philosophical reflections on life and art. Why does the narrator choose to write his story? Is writing a form of self-flagellation, a way of arriving at the truth or a compulsion? Through chronicling a tangled web of relationships, the novel explores the metaphysics of love and of living.

Suresh Joshi (1920-86) spent his childhood in Songadh village in South Gujarat and was Professor of Gujarati in Maharaja Sayaji Rao University, Baroda. One of the foremost modern Gujarati writers, he published short stories, poems, essays, literary criticism and several important novels besides translations from Indian languages and English into Gujarati. He declined a Sahitya Akademi Award for a collection of critical essays because the prize/citation did not recognize his creative writing.

Tridip Suhrud (1965) teaches in the Science and Liberal Arts Programme at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. He works on social history, and the literature of Gujarat. At present he is working on nineteenth century Gujarati autobiographies. He has translated Ashis Nandy's *Indo-Pakistani* into Gujarati, and edited and translated some of Nandy's essays *Pratishabdh* into English.

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Suresh Joshi

Crumpled Letter



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from the Gujarati
original

by Aridip Suhrud

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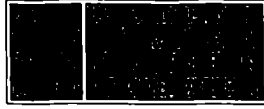
CRUMPLED LETTER



*Clouds hold the water drawn from the ocean,
but it is the clouds to which people look.*

– Jnaneshwar

M A C M I L L A N



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Suresh Joshi
CRUMPLED LETTER

(Chinnapatra)



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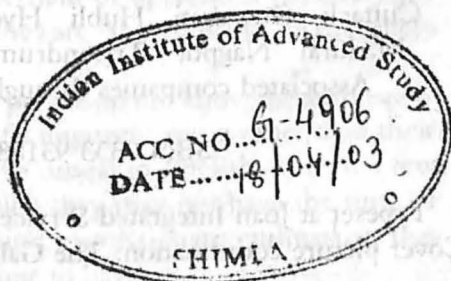
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Translated from the Gujarati original by
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First published in Gujarati in 1965

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First published in 1998

MACMILLAN INDIA LIMITED

Chennai Jaipur Patna Mumbai

Bangalore Bhopal Chandigarh Coimbatore

Cuttack Guwahati Hubli Hyderabad Lucknow

Madurai Nagpur Trivandrum Visakhapatnam

Associated companies throughout the world

SBN 0333 93188 2

Typeset at Joan Integrated Services, Chennai 600 020
Cover picture coordination: The Gallery, Chennai 600 006

Published by

Rajiv Beri for Macmillan India Limited,
21 Patullos Road Chennai 600 002

Printed by

Sri Venkatesa Printing House, Chennai 600 026

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Our project of translations, a collaboration between writers, translators, sponsor and publisher has already released 24 novels including this one. The first eleven books were published in 1996 and another seven a year ago. By the end of the century we hope to finish our programme of 55 novels. Our goal is to try and paint a vivid and general picture of Indian life as revealed by serious post-Independence fiction in Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Gujarati, Oriya, Marathi, Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali and Hindi.

Every language represented in this series carries with it a sense of community or place, or of being “located” in a unique sensibility. We hope that the works selected express those modes of feeling, perceiving and believing that relate to one of the world’s oldest, unbroken traditions.

With the progress of research, scholarship has moved more and more towards narrower fields of specialization. So this makes a survey of a whole field of operations necessary for onlookers whether or not they are “shareholders” in the enterprise of translation.

Even within India most people do not know the anthropology, literature or history of a linguistic group other than their own. For them, we hope to unseal in English, at least a few works from languages which they may not have the time or ability to learn with the kind of missionary enthusiasm that some people expect everyone to have.

Others, raised outside India, (whether of Indian or non-Indian origin) may need some help with references historical, religious, philosophical or cultural. For those readers we have prepared glossaries because we believe that one way of understanding India is to read the literatures of her complex and diverse regions. I am sure there are more eloquent visions but

if these translations help to widen the literary horizons of our readers even slightly, they would not have been published in vain.

This project has been made possible by the generosity of the MR. AR. Educational Society, Madras. Known to us, there has not so far been a similar programme of translations funded by the private sector.

MINI KRISHNAN
Project & Series Editor

ABOUT THE SPONSORS

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When Mrs MR. Omayal Achi and her son Mr MR. Arunachalam died in an air crash on 12 October 1976, the considerable fortune they left behind was converted into the MR. Omayal Achi MR. Arunachalam Trust by their heirs.

Mr A.M.M. Arunachalam is the Managing Trustee, and his three sisters the Founding Trustees of the Trust, the chief functions of which are education and health care in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu, India. The Omayal Achi College of Nursing, Tamil Nadu is also run by the Trust.

Later, a separate body was established called the MR. AR. Educational Society which set up the MR. Arunachalam Vocational Training Centre and the Selva Vinayakar Middle School, all in rural areas. The aims of the Society besides literacy, also include the promotion of Indian literature and scholarship.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

.....

Having read and admired Suresh Joshi's subtlety of thought and the lyrical quality of his writing it is a privilege to translate his work. An act of translation cannot capture from the inside the intensity with which Suresh Joshi meditates upon the cosmological axes on which love and longing are mapped. I could not have even begun to contemplate this exercise without Professor Ganesh Devy's belief in me. I shall always be grateful for that.

This work has been actively supported by the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, which gave me the time and space to complete the project. I am thankful to Shri Vikas Satwalekar, Executive Director NID, for this.

This translation owes much to Mini Krishnan's editorial supervision. She participated in the work as a critical insider, for which I am ever thankful.

Binita Desai has contributed to this translation in more ways than she knows. I am thankful for her friendship.

Megha and I have read Suresh Joshi together. All that Megha wanted to know was whether this book will read like Suresh Joshi. I do not know how to field that one. I value her camaraderie.

My greatest debt however is to my friend and colleague Punam Zutshi, who entered the text with me, illuminating my reading and translation. She read, re-read, and improved upon my translation at every stage. I have no hesitation in saying that the translation is a result of our collaborative efforts.

I thank Sreekumari Pillai for her silent contribution in preparing the typed manuscript.

TRIDIP SUHRUD

INTRODUCTION

.....

Suresh Joshi is quite a phenomenon in Gujarati literature. From the beginning of his literary career, he chose to be consciously different from his predecessors, and throughout his long literary life, distinguished himself from his contemporaries by his limitless search for experimentation. He wrote poetry, short-stories, novellas, personal essays, literary criticism and social critique. He launched a number of literary periodicals such as *Vani*, *Manisha*, *Kshitij*, *Uhapoh*, *Etad*, *Sayujya* and *Setu*. He introduced a whole generation of Gujarati intellectuals to contemporary Western philosophy, lectured on new areas such as Phenomenology and Existentialism, translated modern world classics into Gujarati and created a new literary ethos in Gujarat. The brilliance of his thought, the depth of his contemplation and the range of his learning earned him a large number of literary admirers. Similarly, his stylistic experimentations, often bringing the literary forms he handled to the brink, created for him an equally large number of literary enemies. For almost three decades from the mid-fifties to the mid-eighties — Suresh Joshi became the single most important polarising agent in Gujarati literature. One either admired him, or hated him, but no one could be indifferent to him. To a great extent, the polarisation persists even today, though he died more than a decade ago (1986).

In order to understand this extraordinary centrality of Suresh Joshi to the modernist phase of Gujarati literature, it is necessary to look at the literary aesthetics that he propagated through his writing, lectures, conversations and journals. The main principle in his literary philosophy was that creativity rests in one's ability to totally transform the life-experience into artistic structures. He never denied that the direct personal experience of a writer formed the building

blocks of literary works, but he did not approve of mere documentation or thinly veiled reports as a substitute for fiction. Language, in Suresh Joshi's opinion, is a many layered structure and he often used the metaphor of a seven-storied house to explain this idea. A writer must strive to draw upon the resources of every layer of language. Hence, metaphor and symbol became major concerns in Joshi's literary philosophy. He believed in the ability of fiction to "narrate," but he insisted that this narration be achieved with the bare minimum of a plot. He claimed that while a short story may have a brief verbal span the scope of its signficatory power could be epic, provided the plot element achieved an extreme concealment.

Joshi belonged to the modernist generation of Gujarati writers not so much because of his preoccupation with modernist themes but more so because of his great commitment to the formal aspects of writing. Most of his subjects and themes were drawn from his intense personal experience and his memories of childhood and youth. The environs of his writing were entirely Gujarati. Rarely do we find a Gujarati writer so finely tuned into nature, with the hues and fragrances typical of Gujarat appearing in his writing. And yet, one also finds Joshi conversing with philosophers and thinkers from all over the world. It is appropriate, therefore, to say that Suresh Joshi was a completely Indian Formalist of the Modernist generation. He made that generation as much as he belonged to it.

Chinnapatra is one of the four short novels published in *Katha-Chatushtak*. If a reader approaches it in search of an interesting story, he is likely to be disappointed. It does have a plot; but it is treated as a necessary hindrance. The aim of the novel is not to narrate a story. It is rather to experiment with the limits of communication that a story can make possible. The story element is included in it almost with pain, the story itself being about pain and suffering. Those who knew Suresh Joshi as a person may not fail to detect a very substantial autobiographical element in this story of suffering.

The crucial figure in the plot is Ajay, a shy college student in Bombay who grows into a literary celebrity in his later

years. His companions during his college days include Mala and Lila, two women in whom Ajay perceives a whole cosmic significance, and men like Ashok, Arun and Amal. Ajay is in love with Mala, or more appropriately with a symbol that he thinks Mala is. The story concludes, and one is forced to add perhaps, with Ajay's death. What he leaves behind for Lila and Mala are just some fragments of his mental struggle to understand them, to understand the universe through them, in the form of unfinished letters.

x The story of Ajay's life is told through casual but calculated allusions to his college days, his wild wanderings with friends, journeys on local trains, evenings spent by the sea shore, literary discussions, his attainment of a celebrity status, and other such events. But it is also told through a history of touches and glances, tears shed and silences kept and observed. It is told through references to moments of acute passion, longing, suffering as well as the moments of tenderness experienced, felt and imagined. But it would be more appropriate to say that *Chinnapatra* has more than a single plot. It combines, probably, three stories, the first is about a writer trying to understand love. The second is about Mala and Lila trying to understand Ajay. And, the third and the more difficult story is about Ajay trying to read his entire relationship as a novel, trying to construct and reconstruct it through his meditation on the exact relationship between language and events. The major bulk of *Chinnapatra* is devoted to the last of these three strands. And, accordingly, before the writer gets down to the narrative of the material events, he presents us with fifty intensely lyrical meditations on love.

The Epilogue makes it clear that probably these are the unfinished letters found in Ajay's desk by Lila and Mala. Thus, the plot of Joshi's novel defies all established norms of the linearity of plot and perplexes the reader so much that not one word or sentence in the narrative can be taken for granted. The strategy clearly reflects Joshi's life-long struggle to free language of cliché, of predictability. It may be useful here to quote from an autobiographical piece Suresh Joshi wrote three years before his death:

Language is a seven-storied palace. Many of its corridors remain unattended. An inhibition ridden society tends to neglect them. As such our attitude to language has not always been congenial to creative expression. That attitude has deprived our language from being richly expressive, keeping away several areas of experience from it. In my childhood, whenever I uttered a word, it sent ripples through my heart like a bird flying through the neighbouring hills. Later, I went to towns and cities and heard lifeless words made contourless by etiquette. Solitude was my companion. I often slip from existence to non-existence. In order to salvage existence, one must have a line of a poem, a sentence to clutch at.

Ajay's lifelong connection with Mala, an existence of love that he tries to understand and explore manifests itself through a series of sentences that he seems to be clutching at. They have the intensity and depth of the lines of a poem. *Chinnapatra* communicates Ajay's knowledge of life and death through the rhythms and resonances of poetry more than through the semantic logic of its narrative. It is for this reason that the novel needs to be read more as a series of poetic meditations than as a story about something. It is a different sort of novel, in a class by itself.

The central theme of *Chinnapatra* is freedom, the one that the Word and the World are seeking from each other, but which will always elude the human experience. As Ajay says to Mala in Letter Three, "With just such a word one can converse with you. Such a word has its own cosmos. I write to scatter all the illusory words that I have spoken. Others may believe what they like, I know the illusion that my writing creates, and I know also that its meaning lies in its illusory quality. Through my writing I do not imprison you, but set you free." However, when the word is freed from its experiential quality, it becomes so amnesiac of the world that it almost becomes a pure nothing. "I continue to write to wipe off all traces of your language, but all I get is fame, not you. My illusory words cling to me." Joshi's *Chinnapatra* is an experiment in bringing to light this difficult area of interaction between language and reality. And, he carries out the experiment with a courage that borders on stylistic

brinkmanship. The effect is a poetic prose that has no parallel in the history of the Gujarati language.

One likes to believe that *Chinnapatra* is a symbolic narrative, that Lila and Mala are characters representing the lila and maya of Hindu metaphysics. One likes to believe that Ajay, their maker and victim, is symbolic of Brahman, at once the creator and the sufferer. However, the narrative does not persist with the symbolic elements of the plot beyond a point. The attempt in it appears rather to proceed in the exact opposite direction, that is, the author tries again and again to return to the literal from the margins of the symbolic. The most exciting part of the experience of reading *Chinnapatra* is that it does not allow the reader to indulge in even a single habit of literary expectation.

It is, in a way, a most remorseless narrative, which forces the reader to stay alert throughout and which refuses to fulfill any single expectation from the author. It is, therefore, a novel absorbed in itself, whose unique greatness lies in its formal innovations. The narrative is divided into two sections. 101 The first section contains fifty short letters, written as monologues or the pages of a narcissistic diary. The second section is an Epilogue, in which the point of view changes gradually but conclusively and which allows the reader to look at the author partially from the outside. Initially, the fragmentary letters do not seem to be moving anywhere in terms of the story. They appear to return to the same point, the same emotion, which is a combination of longing and suffering, of nostalgia and evocation. But when one reads the Epilogue, the letters appear in a different light altogether. They acquire a far greater concreteness. The apparently vague sentiment starts revealing a rich texture of allusions to events and relationships. One starts seeing in this texture the author's profound engagement with the question of "truth as revealed in language." To reveal it completely is to destroy it, to conceal it fully is to deny it. It must be revealed by concealing it. Mala becomes his metaphor for this relationship:

You like standing near the window. You are never wholly, fully present anywhere; half on this side of window, half on the other,

half in this birth, half in the previous. By being simultaneously attentive to both, can the two halves of you be brought together, or, I should be divided into two and one part flung as far as the previous birth — and then perhaps you could be attained.

And indeed, the most remarkable element in the narrative is that the narrator presents himself partly as a living being and partly as someone talking posthumously about himself and his life. Suresh Joshi has written another short novel called *Maranottar*, in which he uses the techniques of an extra-terrestrial narrator. Here he combines it with an intense first person narrative particularly in the “letters” section. The effect of this fusion is a disturbing but passionate and deeply moving prose.

Joshi’s Gujarati is a challenge to any translator. It is so rich in texture and so resonant that a translation rarely approaches the awesome beauty of the original. I have had occasions to translate some of his casual and much shorter prose pieces into English, working closely with him. I have seen him give up the exercise altogether in desperation. However, he was himself a wonderful translator and an enthusiastic supporter of translation as a cause. Since I had the opportunity of working with him as a co-editor of *Setu*, a journal of translation, which was published in both Gujarati and English, I can imagine how approvingly he would have viewed Tridip Suhrud’s translation of *Chinnapatra*. That it is now being published in an excellent English translation places the Indian literary world in debt to Macmillan.

1. The first part of the paper is devoted to a general discussion of the problem of the existence of a solution of the system of equations (1) for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β . It is shown that the system has a solution for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β if and only if the condition $\alpha + \beta = 1$ is satisfied.

2. In the second part of the paper the problem of the existence of a solution of the system of equations (1) for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β is solved. It is shown that the system has a solution for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β if and only if the condition $\alpha + \beta = 1$ is satisfied.

3. In the third part of the paper the problem of the existence of a solution of the system of equations (1) for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β is solved. It is shown that the system has a solution for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β if and only if the condition $\alpha + \beta = 1$ is satisfied.

4. In the fourth part of the paper the problem of the existence of a solution of the system of equations (1) for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β is solved. It is shown that the system has a solution for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β if and only if the condition $\alpha + \beta = 1$ is satisfied.

5. In the fifth part of the paper the problem of the existence of a solution of the system of equations (1) for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β is solved. It is shown that the system has a solution for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β if and only if the condition $\alpha + \beta = 1$ is satisfied.

6. In the sixth part of the paper the problem of the existence of a solution of the system of equations (1) for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β is solved. It is shown that the system has a solution for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β if and only if the condition $\alpha + \beta = 1$ is satisfied.

7. In the seventh part of the paper the problem of the existence of a solution of the system of equations (1) for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β is solved. It is shown that the system has a solution for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β if and only if the condition $\alpha + \beta = 1$ is satisfied.

8. In the eighth part of the paper the problem of the existence of a solution of the system of equations (1) for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β is solved. It is shown that the system has a solution for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β if and only if the condition $\alpha + \beta = 1$ is satisfied.

9. In the ninth part of the paper the problem of the existence of a solution of the system of equations (1) for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β is solved. It is shown that the system has a solution for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β if and only if the condition $\alpha + \beta = 1$ is satisfied.

10. In the tenth part of the paper the problem of the existence of a solution of the system of equations (1) for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β is solved. It is shown that the system has a solution for arbitrary values of the parameters α and β if and only if the condition $\alpha + \beta = 1$ is satisfied.

I watch rain turn to small puddles. Sounds become hollow; a light touch and they will disintegrate like the ash at a cigarette tip. If you come here, I will not permit you to utter even a word. I cannot bear your disintegrating words. The light of the street lamp is imprisoned in the puddle. Do you realise how painful it was for me to free the light captured in your tear filled eyes? I like to watch the expanse of saru trees in your eyes. As I walk through that expanse every branch speaks to me. You sweep away everything with the flow of your tears. I strive in vain to salvage nothingness from the disappearing boundaries of tears. I realise then, that what is given to us by tears can be held only through tears. I have no tears. I surrendered all my tears to the lost stream of my village. When I was leaving, Dadaji told me, "You are a man now. What should flow from your eyes is fire, not tears." Therefore, I am unable to hold on to what you give me through your tears. Some of it is captured by the wind, some of it by water.

What if I fix your eyes here, in place of the windows? At present, my room is blind. Table and chair in that corner and the bed lying next to it try to find one another by expanding their shadows; like the blind who search each other out. Sometimes they stumble and fall on my shadow. But I am not complaining about this sightless room. Solitude is blind. I have not delved in this limitless ocean of blindness to find a pearl. I have delved into this ocean so that it can dispel the thick, solid darkness enveloping me. The ocean will chisel my blindness and render it diamantine. You will accept it then, won't you? Or, will the fear that the diamond might lure you to extinguish life, prevent you?

You have not forgotten Amal, or have you? He was here today. Outside was moonlight. The cold was deathly, like an executioner. What we experience in a morgue. Amal was enveloped by this cold. He appeared blurred. He might have said something. But his words must have become icicles and scattered in their fall. If he had continued to speak I would have gathered his frozen words into a ball and flung it at him. But I am certain that it would have bounced off the enveloping shield and hurt me. We have played such games often. On some days you were determined not to utter a single word. Your silence hurt me. Its marks are still on my body. If someone were to ask me — what is it that you share with Mala — my reply would be — silence. You took pity on me and did not speak till the end. That was very kind. But Amal has come to me to inquire about you. How strange — or should I say cruel! You hide from me and yet, everyone tries to find you in me. That is my identity. I am reduced to a darkness in which you can lose yourself. Amal is seated in front of me, searching for your words on my lips, trying to fathom the mysteries of your eyes by looking into mine. Even if I flee to a distant land I won't be able to exorcise you from the depths of my darkness. But why have you chosen to live in my darkness? Amal, Ramesh, Arun, everyone asks me this — what should I tell them? Amal has come to me to talk about you, he is leafing through my books looking for signs of you. But he does not ask me anything. He is afraid to even mention your name, lest I say it aloud. I wander and stumble through unknown places. I inflict new wounds and let my poison flow with the blood. As you used to say, in me even poison is sweet. But it is poison nevertheless. And therefore, weren't you trying to draw away not so much from poison as from its deceptive

sweetness? Are we not caught in the web that we spin in our attempts to run away from each other?

THREE

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Sometimes we locate a word that we've been searching for since we were children. This word is perfect, it needs no honing. You stand talking to me in the sun and looking up, shut your eyes, even that is contained in this word. You came one evening and stood there weeping, choking on your sobs and left without a word; the damp of your silence is also a part of this word. And my frozen anguish. The lanes we walked in silence and later rolled into a ball, the flickering light of its lamp, the wounded darkness curled up in a corner, the strange noises and anguished cries of the city swirling around us like a whirlwind, are also contained in it. With just such a word one can converse with you. Such a word has its own cosmos. I write to scatter all the illusory words that I have spoken. Others may believe what they like, I know the illusion that my writing creates, and I know also that in its illusory quality lies its meaning. Through my writing I do not imprison you, but set you free. Mala, isn't freedom nothingness? I ask you this because you used to say, "I gather nothingness in my tears." You were too young to even begin to speak such words. And I write because I want to take revenge on all those who have inflicted mindless torture on you by teaching you such language. I continue to write to wipe off the traces of your language, but all I get is fame, not you. My illusory words cling to me. Even you believe that these words are figurative of me. I strive to ignite a fire which will drive the moisture from these words. You know how we formed words, to shape words how we sought demons and cast them into the fire?

Can a nothingness — as you speak of it — be bound by tears? Our strivings will not create such distances that

encompass nothingness. Then what is the reason for such impotent distancing? The word which I located today could not have been formed without your silence. And it is through the existence of this word that I remind you of our connectedness. But do you believe that memories are given only to the living?

FOUR

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4 — Lila was enraged. But you know her — she looks delicate even in anger. Anger turns some people brittle. And others monstrous. The eyes widen, bulging not in rage but in melancholy, the lower lip begins to droop, its movement obscene. But some bodies blossom in anger, turning a flaming red like the seemul or the gulmohar flowers. One wants to embrace these bodies to rob them of their glow. Your anger breaks like the seven seas. I am flung far away — where their tides do not reach me. But I allow Lila's rage to blossom. I watch her blossom — I cannot hear her words. I ask her, "What did you say? Say it once more," and Mala, when I stupidly ask her this, she is no longer irate, she suddenly laughs. Laughter washes her rage away. Then I ask her: "What is the matter Lila? I do wrong, but do all errors inflame?" She says: "If error causes rage it implies a lack of affection. No, no, I am not angry. But I get irritated with you and therefore I say what I do." I ask her; "What is the reason for your irritation?" She says: "The reason? I don't know the reason but I feel that instead of speaking to me, you fabricate stories and hide behind them. Your story has romance, I agree, but to attain you..." I do not hear her sentence. I recall your words: "What is this attainment? Does anyone attain even themselves here? Come, help me. Once I attain myself, I will surrender that to you." I did not speak then, but Mala I say today, how fulfilling it would be if our hearts accepted this distinction of before and after! The heart does not perceive sequence. What if the process

of realising one's self gained fulfillment in the love of others and in sacrifice to the loved one? You would have retorted: "I don't want to argue with you. When will a person who can't let an argument pass, have space for love?"

I had imagined you would react like this and therefore, I did not speak. But when I do not speak Lila stares at me with a withering look. I say: "Why should one hide? For the pleasure of being sought. Therefore, it is given to love to be mysterious." But this mysterious element, my metaphysics of love, fell from Lila's eyes as two teardrops.

FIVE

.....

"Everybody has secrets that haunt them. In some it is revealed through their eyes, in others through their touch. Sometimes a secret encompasses two individuals. Then it opens up a ground for an intense relationship between them. I say intense because on the surface we are caught in a web of relationships. The heart moves on a deeper plain to establish contact with the other who is party to the secret. Often the secret feeds on agony. This anguish bears no relation to any lack, longing or inequity. This anguish is like the very air we breathe, without which we cannot live. Perhaps the word 'anguish' does not describe it, because the heart has no respite from it, the eyes shine wet, the voice trembles imperceptibly. Words acquire a new pitch. Deprivation gives rise to varieties of suffering. But this anguish is different..." As I sat writing this morning, I hoped that you would, unknown to me, look over my shoulder and read these lines, your laughter reveals your presence to me and your arms envelop me. But to hear you laugh, will I always have to speak of suffering?

I have not gone out for four days. I surround myself with the worn light of this sightless room. Like a touch from a past life, my surroundings recede from me, yet are not lost. But

today they have the unboundedness of a map. I exist like a point on it. Some rivers run by. One of them is you — Kir-tinasha¹! The richness of our relationship is washed away in the spate of your tears. Having rid themselves of tears your eyes are pure. Perhaps you do this to cleanse yourself. But do you realize — you imprison me in your purity? And isn't this presence of mine the very source of your agony? And then do you not cry to wash me away? One cannot read the next birth but will our relationship entirely overwhelm this one?

SIX

6
There are so many people — why recount their names? Why do human beings meet each other? So that they can erase each other's names from the memory, smoothen the angularities and if both sides are fortunate, create a new constellation in their nothingness? Around me people speak. Sometimes the flow of words dries up, some times it crashes against the boulders and drenches every one. I merely keep count of the words. I do not connect one word to another. To unite a moment with another, a word with another and man with God — from where will I get what it takes to do this? Long ago I exhausted the element of love that enables these unions between the two of us. As children play with cowries¹, I toss these moments around and I pass each word-bead through my fingers. Often I wonder if you string together your tears. Do you unite two moments of silence? Perhaps their coming together would be explosive, and you would evaporate. And then you would reappear as a tear in the eye of an ocean and drop into the foaming wave on some unknown coast. And so attain moksha². Look I have found you your paradise. But you are not one to accept a paradise of another's finding. Perhaps my life would be spent in circumambulating your pride. Every circumambulation brings merit. Is that why you are

caught circling your tears? And so I think, is there something that I have which will reduce your merit to nought? The detachment that merit brings is worthy of worship, and this detachment finds fulfillment in glory. Amid the sound of bells and the light of lamps the resplendence of some black stone god with flashing eyes comes to reside within us.

I am surrounded by people — how easily they accept me! I envy them. And what about you? You never allow yourself to speak of such things. Your silence is not manifest. You talk about the drape of curtains, of flowers, you talk incessantly. But the deep silence underlying your chatter startles me. Sometimes I wonder; isn't woman concealment? Every cosmos has its concealment — but who dares to remove the shroud from nothingness?

SEVEN

.....

The railway station — tracks wriggling
like earthworms, mesmerising signals, comings and goings intersecting each other. I drink tea at the stall. It tastes different. As if the environs have melted into it. I savour that taste for some time. Lila asks me, "What are you thinking of?" I don't give her the answer that she wants — not because I intend to be stubborn — but for the sake of the truth. She thinks I am confused, she engages me in a conversation. I listen — how colourful the talk is — like a piece of glass in a kaleidoscope. Lila speaks like that, laughs like that. She disperses colour. Cannot even imagine that her anger would culminate in laughter. I watch Lila. She tries to catch a moth that's on the collar of my coat, and it flies off. For her such small things are complete in themselves. With every small incident, cosmic cycles are completed. A new cosmos manifests itself — so many sunrises, so many sunsets! I watch Lila's face. Perhaps there must be some fulfillment in watching this play of dissolution and creation on her face. The smoke from a passing engine makes her eyes water.

Even this is an interesting event for her. She savours each event. She grows lighter with each such event. She is not bound by what she enjoys.

Suddenly my train rushes on to the platform. Faces and shadows from inside the train pierce the faces and shadows on the platform. We turn to small particles and disperse. After some time things come back to their former state. We stare at others, recognise some. I get on to a train and sit next to a window. Windows in our houses are sightless, but the train window casts us out, speeding like a flung ball that traverses an expanse. And that is why I start wandering. Putting together what we collect will not enrich us. It is proper then to disperse it. But you don't believe my reasoning. In any case when did you ever believe me? Perhaps the pain of your disbelief makes me restless. The train leaves the station. For some time Lila's words hover around me like butterflies.

Your body is infinite. Your arms reaching out to mine — is that their limit?

Of course not, and then an ocean of sensation arises. Deep in that ocean are pearls. I continue to gather them. Your tresses can enmesh me for many births. Their fragrance is more intoxicating than wine. Another body, the inner self, lies beneath the outer body, and I have attained that inner self of yours. And therefore I feel that I have no quarrels with Amal, Arun or Ramesh. My quarrels are with you. Have you no affection for that self? The environs of your mind perhaps don't allow affection to take form. Therefore, I strive to preserve what you will allow to wither in a moment. Not because I have any claims over it but, with a hope that some day you might feel some affection for this self too. But Mala, often the inner selves of two people merge into each other. Something touches your soul, but you don't allow its emotion to reveal itself. I feel that way myself and perhaps that's

what irritates you.

Women long to be mysterious, wish to disappear without a trace. And that's why I say to you that I have gathered enough darkness where you can hide yourself, live a hidden existence. But the idea of losing oneself frightens me and so does your habit of dissolving yourself with every tear. All doors can be closed — but not the eyes, sometimes even death fails to shut them. Therefore vacant eyes are more fearful than death itself. I wander to distant places and collect images to fill your eyes with. Temple flags, a herd of shadows in the village pasture, the unblinking eyes of a small pond, children rushing out of school like a sea of joy, the dark, grey silence of groves on distant mountains, the suffering of rivers that carry skies to term. The noises of cities, time sticking its neck out to announce itself amidst the clutter of cities, an unknown girl putting her hand out to say "bye-bye," railway stations at night looking like caves of darkness, the enveloping rivers of sleep, the play of light on the river front — the reflection of a lit pyre. All these I have placed in offering before your eyes. Perhaps I was born to do this. 9

A princess is struck dumb with sorrow. Performers, clowns have come from distant lands, I am one of them. Perhaps I was born to shatter your sorrow. But what about the next life?

NINE

.....

Isn't writing itself a form of self-flagellation? To keep alive the withering, blurred, disappearing emotions, that give the heart no respite; if that is not enough to conjure up countless possibilities and situations. To consign the heart to the conflict of pain and pleasure. And after submitting it to conflict, to strive to keep it whole. To write with total composure and confidence, without the slightest tremor of the hand, without the

tears blurring the eyes — even this pain must be intoxicating. Or else why would there be a community of martyrs who give up their lives for writing? Therefore Mala believes that one should not undertake such tribulations. Everything must either be contained in the silence or be allowed to flow out with silent tears. This is not possible for everyone. Perhaps writing is a compulsion. Those who stand surrounded by the debris of themselves, with what will they assemble words? The search for that uniting element must be the most important discovery for man. The world in which we live will disintegrate with a single sigh. To be alive, we have to recreate the world every moment. It is an imperative for those who live in an unmediated relationship with creation itself. What about Lila? What links the discontinuous moments of her self, is only her name. And hence, she makes many others suffer. That pain is also a form of connectedness. Pain is weighty, weight accumulates. But what about those who do not allow connectedness to be possible, do not allow anything to accumulate? Mala does not believe in these things. Like the ballast in a ship, we need weights to keep us upright. That weight could be anything. Some tears, silence and even darkness. Lila's strength lies in her ability to keep others ignorant of her burdens. Not just that, she also lifts the weight from your heart.

I feel calm in Lila's presence. Human vanity becomes laughable when one is with her. She does not allow me to search for the truth hidden behind her masks, that's what attracts me to Lila. Lila must be watched when alone. She uses us to punctuate the flow of her existence. But this is not a purely instrumental relationship. What if she hears me talk like this? How many relationships do we need to complete our own image? But relationships cannot be counted. Mala's need to engage in calculated relationships is self-destructive. I say this not from envy alone, but also from love. Does not my defeat lie in the fact that Mala seeks to efface herself?

Space may be alien, but we fit all things in the boxes of our old habits.

Moving to a new house, we demarcate spaces — “this is where my study will be,” “we will spend the evenings here” — and in doing so, we recreate the old map in a new house. I would have done the same here, but I have not allowed this space to become a house. There is no corner to nurture my melancholia. I have merged the house with the outside. We scatter ourselves on the streets. Hoardings and signboards of shops, shouts of street vendors, a cat jumping from one roof top to the other, downward gazing sheep moving in a single file — all these do not happen outside me. I have not separated myself from these things. Mala, your silence becomes bearable in a crowd. At such times your silence is one of the many things surrounding me. Your coming and sitting near the window, listening to me without attention, after a while even forgetting to murmur acknowledgment, my sadness and anger at your indifference, my pain causing confusion in you, your efforts to find a reason for not coming again, my comprehending you — all these unchanging routines of ours will not work in this house.

II

Don't think I am luring you to come here. Anyway, you cannot be tempted into coming. But Mala, what happened to you the other day? As if you didn't want to leave me at all? You were afraid of something. I do not know of what. But to regain your composure you wanted to place me between your fear and yourself, isn't it? For such fleeting moments I am tempted to believe that you will come closer to me. What comes together is your fear and my temptation, never us. Received your letters. I have not read them. To be honest, I can never decipher your letters completely. Where do you sit writing them, what casts their shadows on them,

where do you disappear leaving them incomplete, I was not the only one you were thinking about — this I understand — what memories are shaken up as you write? Your letters do not give a clue to such questions. Therefore I put them away and hurry out of the house. Once outside, I lose myself in the laughter and wailing of strangers. I make a new start at building things: one word after another word. Night passes, I gather together pieces of light in the morning and set free the memories of the previous night.

ELEVEN

12

Seated in a restaurant, I watch. The flap door cuts people into two. One only sees legs. I watch legs go by: impatient, lazy, worried, anguished, enthusiastic. I walk out and feel that I am nothing but legs. I told you once about a German play: "Deposit your heads here, we will give you a receipt for it. If your torso does not feel comfortable without a head, we will give you balloons to replace them. Free yourself from your head once. You will never reclaim it." Sometimes I see things clearly: you need a special environment to reveal yourself. You want to reveal yourself to me. I misunderstand your need. And you, instead of revealing, wish to lose your self. To lose yourself you need to delve deep into me. Where else can you hide yourself? This is painful. Pain nourishes you. Mala, won't it become our prison? Don't you think you should reveal yourself without the fear that I might misunderstand? That day my coming was insignificant for you. I arrived to witness your happiness. You preferred the warmth and closeness of Arun. You were speaking of trivia with such enthusiasm. Your words mingled with the air. Arun has no such desires, he does not want much from your words. Even when your hands touch my head by mistake, your look upbraids me, as if it were my fault. When others notice this, you are enraged. But Arun could well carry you around in his arms.

Why do I recall such things today? Yes, perhaps because I have preserved all such episodes of your presence. Some day — and that day has to come — together, we will put things in perspective and in doing so, our true images will emerge. About this, I have no doubts. And isn't this the reason why even despite the distance — or perhaps because of it — we nurse our love?

TWELVE

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Today, there is a spray of sunlight. Some of it is caught in your hair. It is possible today to converse with the skies. Constellations can be chiselled out of your silence. Therefore I feel you as close as a distant star. The richness of love is the distance that we have collapsed between us. But does one cultivate distance through mathematical equations? Am I looking for solace to make the distance between us bearable? No, the distance of which we are not a part, is like a thorn. How empty they become — those who externalise the distance and reduce the self! They do not realise that emptiness spreads like plague. Mala, we inhabit the space which divides us. I am happy for that. Once we expand the distance, it can be contained within our hearts. But the distance which is not allowed to manifest, grows out from our hearts, like the peepal tree growing out of the stone walls of a well. There is something magical about the air today. Blocks from the stone houses are floating. As if people are running after their lost voices. The kite-string of our vision slips from our fingers. At such moments, the paths of the sun, the moon, and the earth are contained within the heart. Death unmasks itself and seats itself near us. The Gods stop playing hide and seek. Mala, even your tears can be played with. It will be nice to go to distant, unknown places looking for them. Don't we sometimes lose track of the familiar and find ourselves in the unknown? For a moment it causes fear, but soon we start savouring the taste

of familiarity. Mala, we will not call it love, nor call it companionship, but as Lila says — “something.” Let’s loosen the bonds. We will not tie anything down, not even our happiness. We can scatter ourselves like sunrays.

Will my words ever find a reflection but for your unstirring silence? How deeply they are joined — my words and your silence! We have nourished it with all that is us — pain, pleasure, everything. A moment will come when they will become one. What will remain is that wholeness, not us.

THIRTEEN.....

14

Solitude — as we call it — is it really solitude? Don’t we create solitude to be near some one? Last night I was out till late. There was a chill in the air. The moonlight was hazy. Human forms were unclear. Sounds were muffled. As if the world was disappearing through someone’s magic. The world was distanced, objectified. I could have reached myself through something else. The light had a floating quality to it. Slowly, everything was going round. Suddenly fear gripped me. What will become of my inner world? My memories? You? Were they also vanishing, disappearing in the mist, in the blurred moonlight? I tried looking for you. But I could conjure up only a point far away — a point which remains in the distance after a train has run past a station. Then I tried to bring to mind my self — my self seemed only an emotion. A feeling of having been mauled all over. I thought why should this vanishing world be linked to fear? Why associate it with pleasure even? Gradually, everything was enveloped by nothingness, even the consciousness that could perceive nothingness dissolved in a mist. I kept moving like a line through this disappearing world. The movement was without a clear direction. Walking was effortless. One could get away, far away like this. Suddenly a strange, sharp voice awakened me from this state. A form beneath a blurred lamp, a waxen face,

eyes devoid of feelings — that face had no use for eyes — but they were there and that laughter! I had bumped into it. It brought its face close to my ears — made some obscene demand. She clasped my hands and started dragging me. But her hands — they were like melting wax. Her laughter instead of disintegrating was forming different shapes and clinging to me. My face was layered with it. I must escape before wax engulfed me. I rushed towards the lights of a speeding car. Suddenly the car braked. That laughter became a scream and disappeared. I did not wait to look for it. I heard it after some time. Somehow I reached home. Switched on the light. Something was sitting on my bed. Some creature from the lost ages. It was panting, its eyes were glowing like burning coal. I switched off the lights.

FOURTEEN

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“You’re ‘A’?”

15

“Yes.”

“Do you know ‘B’?”

“Yes.”

“‘B’ asked me to meet you.”

“Oh.”

A clock struck ten, the calendar fluttered.

“I’ll ask you something.”

“Oh!”

“Will you read something that I’ve written?”

“O.K.”

“Then I’ll see you after a few days.”

“O.K.”

I saw her leave. She was hiding five years of her age. Her eyes were alive, but in the manner of a fish in still waters. Which did not disturb the waters. But was this water or glass?

Her face was lined. Inscriptions of the pain of wandering in many lands. I was reading what she had written. Each word

leapt as if electrified, unable to hold together as a single sentence. How much poison she has sucked from travels in distant lands! Its sting flows through the veins of each of her words. Her words were coloured green. A child's laughter growing in them like moss in a pond. The utterance of love flew out of them, startled like a bird in the night. Somewhere there was a hint of peace, but this peace was like the dying eyes of a slaughtered beast. Sometimes a flutter of joy — like the laughter of a marble mausoleum on a moonlit night. There was fire behind your silence, its flame could be perceived sometimes. As I slept that night, shutting windows, shutting eyes, the world she had wrought began to circulate in my body. Some creature was nuzzling the closed window. Had it scented flesh? Even from the other side of the barred window, the sharp smell of its praying hunger wafted to me. All night it knocked against the window. Sometimes, mistaking the beating of my heart for this sound, I grew frightened. Fright does not need a large space to grow. Even the corner of the eye can gather enough fear to destroy all creation.

FIFTEEN

.....

Perhaps everything could have begun differently. Today, we have drawn tangents. Having diverged like radii from a centre, we search for points of contact. This would not then have been necessary. "That's destiny," you'd say. "Who determines destiny?" I'd ask. "We! That's who," laughing shamelessly you'd reply. And the conversation between us would come a full circle. All our attempts to rearrange the past from the imperatives of the present are not only untruthful but even impoverished and cowardly. It shows a lack of vision about the future. Your last letter said, "These days you seem to revel in self-condemnation. Earlier you thrived on self-praise. That can be tolerated but self-condemnation is nauseating. The blatant secret about self-condemnation is the desire to torture loved

ones. I would grant this if love itself engaged in such analysis. But you know that the nature of love is not analytical." This sentence makes me laugh. Perhaps love does not engage in analysis. How we take it to pieces on the pretext of understanding its true nature. "Love has no past, no present, only a future" or "Love is all encompassing." I say to tease you. It even devours time — time that is said to devour everything. The maturity of love depends upon its devouring time.

You would by now be very angry. I must end this discourse on love. You like standing near the window. You are never wholly, fully present anywhere; half on this side of the window, half on the other, half in this birth, half in the previous. By being simultaneously attentive to both, can the two halves of you be brought together, or should I be divided into two and one part flung as far as the previous birth — and then perhaps you could be attained.

Otherwise, why would what happened the other day have occurred at all? It was you who insisted that I come. On arriving I realised I was one of the ten, about to be erased by others. Anjali sat next to me. She took my hand in hers and examined my diamond ring — just to let people know that she could be quite brazen, if she wanted to. On my other side, Arun — he holds your face in his hands and gazes into your eyes. And you! You behave as if you're untouched by it all, as if unknown to the self, you belong to someone else. Amal searches my eyes for a spark of jealousy. For a moment, I pity you, him, everyone. Even as we sat together, I was far away, listening to the hushed conversations about our loves.

17

SIXTEEN

.....

Our collective deaths hover on the horizon like vapour. Perhaps on behalf of everyone, I am the only one watching it. Perhaps you're watching it too — and applying it to your eyes like

kohl. I like kissing your eyes. I will kiss death from your eyes. There is death in every kiss. If, after a kiss, the lips look untouched and the face does not alter, then it is not a kiss but only a ritual of love!

But today, close by, perhaps beneath that photograph or between the pages of the book I was reading or perhaps behind the curtain, death hides, panting. I can't imagine it to be large. At the most, it must be like an ant. It casts no shadow. It can't afford to have a shadow, because shadows tell tales. How often haven't you been caught because your shadow gave you away, isn't it? Perhaps death is a form of hiding, don't those who hide within themselves nurture little deaths? Therefore, what meets is not only two lives but also two deaths. Sometimes in love only deaths meet...

There is a letter from Lila. I am copying it out here:

After many days, all of us were together. Since everyone was there, I thought you would be too and if you weren't, you should be coming soon. Mala came later, only when I phoned her. I don't know why, but I can't separate you and Mala. But when Mala came, she was accompanied by an unknown young man. The truth? I don't even remember his name. He was good looking, but there was something special about him as well. I did not care to find out what. You know Mala doesn't speak much, but yesterday she spoke incessantly; we didn't have to say anything. But can words be rendered so empty? They were floating around us like bubbles. A rainbow of colours could be seen in them, but they would disintegrate at a mere hint of a breeze. Perhaps Mala also disintegrates, but she needs a witness. A woman can find many to play the role of a witness. Do something; show the distinction between the lover and the witness. Don't be irritated. I am only joking. But after the charade was over, Mala beckoned to me, "Seen Ajay? He was here..."

Yesterday, I had a strange experience. The world of the night is very different. Dreams connect different times. Directions and constellations change. It is not possible always to gather together all these in the morning and remain the same. Therefore, we will have to search the past, the present and the future for signs of pain that remain unchanged. Otherwise, the next day, everything will be topsy-turvy. Through a film of tears in our eyes, we see things double, the two shadows of the world get enmeshed and drive us mad. I perceive my voice to be separate from me. At one moment my voice sounded like a piece of paper flying in the air, at the next like the ringing of a distinct clock. It became like a lamp burning in day time and the enveloping silence of the room. At such times, one cannot bear to be alone. One wants to be surrounded by lots and lots of people. Therefore, I invited many: cut-outs of young women from advertisements for cosmetics, young men who resemble jokers from the circus, one or two poets who are like lonely fountains standing in a garden, some novelists who walk around wearing the shroud of mummies, and some citizens in armour brittle as glass. You know, I don't like such things. But what torture human beings not inflict on themselves in order to find the self! I played hide and seek with my voice for a long time.

I remembered that evening. All three of us were together: I, Lila and you. I wasn't speaking, nor were you, Lila was doing all the talking. We were walking on a deserted road. The darkness was deepening. Blurred roadside lamps would light our faces and then we would be erased. Our words fluttered in the breeze, unburdened by meaning. Even otherwise when were Lila's words ever weighed down by meaning! Then, instinctively your fingers entwined mine. And so, we

walked a long distance. Then we were caught in the headlights of an approaching truck. I stir that moment of pleasure in the misty light of this evening and enjoy its sweetness. I know you don't like this. For those who live by memories, memories become the essence. Then the present or the future has to be pushed into the past and left at its mercy!

EIGHTEEN

.....

20 We call it a moment, but how it expands in a theatre of the mind! As such there was nothing. Suddenly, for a moment, you rested your head on my shoulder and sat, eyes closed. Your breath warmed my earlobe. Next moment, someone appeared, suddenly you moved away from me, became a stranger, your eyes filling with anger against me. The two of us were not strangers, the one who arrived was. But the moment of your fleeting anger, felt with some degree of repentance, grew large in my consciousness like the endless days of summer. Perhaps, all that we are left with at the end of our lives are some such moments. The rest is Time. The event which does not remain in the confines of time, goes beyond it and expands, lives in the heart of the poet. Isn't it true of human beings also? Society functions through those who fit into the frame of established relationships, not going beyond it. But this is not how the heart moves. This is why when someone tried to comprehend our relationship by giving it a name, we were evasive. Yes, some may find this cowardly, defensive and dishonest too.

That day there was no one else, the two of us were alone. Such situations made you uncomfortable. You started bothering about inconsequential details. What if Lila misses a bus? What if Amal did not meet Arun? What if Ba¹ had not kept aside some milk? — I watched your unnatural anxiety. Suddenly, you came close to me and clasped my hands, your eyes tearful. You were propelled by the force of some unknown

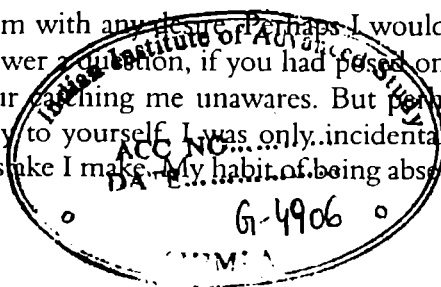
pain. I had to be cautious, that the intensity of my love had not given birth to this pain. I knew that at the very next moment you would be irritated by your tears. But, the next moment, you looked at me and laughed. Your eyes were still wet. Encouraged by your laughter, I held your face between my palms. Your eyes were smiling. I leaned forward to kiss you, your crafty eyes blinked a No, but you did not attempt to remove your face from my hands; bringing my face close to your ears, I whispered; "Mala!" You said: "Hmm!" It was not impatience, there was no anxiety to hear me say anything. But this utterance which had escaped Time made our love infinite!

NINETEEN

Perhaps women desire some dark forest, some degree of violence. Like Vaidarbhi¹, women desire to lose themselves in the dense woods of a man's powerful lust. There are moments when the seductiveness of a Karkotak² engulfs them, their clothes stolen in this enchanted slumber. Mala, even silence has its forests. Perhaps thicker than those of lust; nothingness has fangs. Sometimes utterances like "hmm" save us from it.

21

You were walking down the Juhu beach, in the blurry darkness of the evening wishing to be indistinct. Suddenly your feet sank into the wet sand. You caught my hand for support. For some time you continued like this. You were saying something. I did not want to be aware enough to receive those words; still I knew that between the blurry evening, the roar of the sea and the rustling of coconut leaves, your words were not incidental. But I did not want to hear them with any desire. Perhaps I would have been unable to answer a question, if you had posed one. I would have liked your catching me unawares. But perhaps you were talking only to yourself. I was only incidental. Lila says this is the mistake I make. My habit of being absent at crucial moments



is responsible for all these. And perhaps, therefore, our love is unsheltered and without the covert solitude of closed doors, it cannot claim even darkness for itself. I ask in irritation: "So it is. What next?" Laughing, she says: "Next comes a full stop, meaning nothing." I say, "Why only a full stop? There could also be a question mark." She laughs, "A knowledge of grammar is not always beneficial to love." To appear calm, my voice becomes a rasp, "To pull the other, to be pulled by the other (and then one aspires to do this for lives to come) the intention to exhibit this to society and still keep it hidden, is this something other than child's play?" Hearing me speak thus, Lila stares at me, as if she were looking at a strange animal in the zoo. A shadow of pain touches her face. She places her hands on my shoulders, as if she wants to shake me away, I see that the corners of her eyes are moist. As if not satisfied, I continue, "Jealousy comes on the heels of love and love dives to its death into the bottomless pit of jealousy."

TWENTY

Your childhood playmate — your doll — is with me. When the sunrises, filtered by red curtains fall on her face, it looks as if her mouth is oozing blood. Still, the omnipresent smile. If you saw her in this condition, you would have clasped her to your bosom. But sometimes I think like Rilke, the blood flowing through my veins gives the surrounding darkness a reddish hue, have you seen this?

Now the sun has moved, the doll's smiles are golden. As if she is talking to some fantastic people. The wind craning its neck through the window listens to this and sways. The shadows sway in agreement. When the noon sun brightens everything in the house, it looks as if the doll is holding court like a queen. As if, the silence of the afternoon is her eloquence. The sun is straining its ears. This silence fills the

shallow banks of my afternoon sleep.

As the sun goes down, the shadows lengthen. All the jinns of the *Arabian Nights* emerge. All the fairies go into hiding leaving the doll alone. The doll is lost like a speck of dust in the eyes of a demon. Darkness descends. The doll grows formless. I switch on the light. Once again, the doll holds court royally. The moonlight comes to pay obeisance. The darkness has been banished. The wind stands guard. The stars tell stories of distant lands. A coral island forms in the depths of my slumber. There the doll sits on the throne, the beating of my heart, the prince's galloping horse. The prince is coming from a distant land — far away. And then — did they meet or not, whether the shehnais¹ played or not — who knows! Everything is dragged away in a single movement of nothingness!

Does this nothingness ever sparkle in your eyes as tears? Has the wind, reveller of secrets everywhere, ever whispered my tale in your ears? Or are you still seated amidst the debris of the years gone by watching the remains of your doll? My happiness already worn to the bone is about to lose even the laughter on its face. I do not mourn this in front of you. Till today, you have not put aside your pain to perceive my happiness.

23

TWENTY-ONE

So, Amal is to marry? Who is this Swati? Have I seen her? Lila tells me to watch over you. I know, Amal's decision must have wounded you. It is necessary to be with your pain. Lila does not understand this. We strive to be normal, to avoid the untoward. But how these efforts at normalcy exhaust us! I think well of Amal — this feeling is not cultivated. When I grasped that you were favourably inclined towards him, I was hurt. But the true prayer in my heart was this, "May you attain everything in your love for Amal." At the same

time, I knew that you did not want Amal to hate me. Nor did you want to detach from Amal. And Arun? Sometimes you did not tire of praising Arun. If that gives you happiness, I have no objection. But you get angry with me: "You examine everyone as if they were characters in a story; and is your analysis always true? You forget to be human." You think, I am heartless. And now as you wish it, I never ask after Amal. But Mala, what do these lines from your letter mean? I like to watch the waning moon, because I also wane in my own anguish. As children, while playing hide and seek you uttered my name whenever asked "*Ane Ghen Diva Ghen* who is on your mind?" How often were you wrong? Didn't you recognise my touch? Perhaps that was not the age when one could discern touch. And once after winter, before the arrival of spring, you named our relationship and whispered it into my ears. Since then I have been dissolving like a salt doll in the seven seas of my tears. I am not capable of emptying these seven seas. But if you want the seven seas to separate us, you will also have to bear the lash of its tides.

24

In the force of the sea's waves, lies the force of my passions. Tears can fill lakes, but you desire oceans. What if I burn like a forest fire in these?

TWENTY-TWO

No, I did not hope to see you at the station. Perhaps, I would not even have informed you of my coming. But Lila met me there. She tried to make me laugh, as if I were grieving. Have I become so pitiable? I would have, as always, reached your home unannounced but it is not possible any longer. Amal's marriage has created a distance between us. Even while I say that I am not responsible for this, I will not be able to escape its repercussions.

Meanwhile, people have showered much praise on me for a work of no profound depth. I am not ensnared by fame;

but I try to be indifferent to it. Sometimes, the cacophony of fame smothers me. But will it create a distance between us? Most people prize a glittering name. But didn't we bury my name the other day? You said: "I will nourish it with my tears and it will blossom again." And I had said: "Will I have to cause those tears to flow?" You responded, "A man feels fulfilled if he has a woman crying for him." But Mala, isn't this a grave injustice? I caressed your face and said, "See, now you have a new face. This is not the old Mala." You happily said, "Yes — now you will erase the difference between the old Mala and the new." I responded with a touch, because words are forgotten but a touch becomes one with the beating of the heart, it sparkles through the eyes.

Mala, you know I do not care for fame. It is difficult to live with two very different personae. But if one becomes a part of you, I can deal with the other. Yes, I have always desired this. But those who do not know us say that you are attracted to my fame. Fame comes with the shadow of disrepute.

But I shake off even my name before coming to you. You meet me but are always veiled from me. Perhaps you wish my smouldering pain will cause this veil to melt away. But is this necessary? Questioning is the form our love takes. You will promptly correct me, "Not ours, yours." I am quick to respond, "And yours consists of silence, doesn't it?"

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TWENTY-THREE

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You arrive in a tearing hurry. Though you were talking to me, your mind was wandering. All of a sudden you asked, "I want to offer myself to you, you will accept, won't you?" But the fear that I might respond too soon, made you say before I could even answer, "All that can be done at leisure. There is a lifetime for it. But now don't delay me. I want to leave in ten minutes." I didn't want to ask but couldn't restrain myself,

"Where to?" You replied in mock anger, "Good. As if I have already given myself to you" — but then promptly said — "To meet Amal." I couldn't say anything for a little while. And you added as if you felt obliged to give more information. "I have called him. What if I don't go..." But you spoke incessantly, in a desperate attempt to cover up the main issue. I listened. But I don't remember even a word of it because I was speaking to you in my mind. "This is our destiny. You move away from me, radius like, but ultimately come back to me. Because you don't have a centre outside of me. Mala, the centre is the firm anchor from which the radius can move out, the centre cannot grow. If this is destiny, what else can I do but watch your wanderings? Mala, you are free, because I am dependent. Whenever you return, you come back with new pain. As if you wander to collect more pain!" But I do not say anything to you. After a while you press my eyes with your hands and speak indistinctly into my ears and even before I open my eyes, you have vanished. A few rose petals from your *veni*¹ are scattered. I do not gather them.

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Someone is making a sculpture by corroding the metal with acid. I am told that this sculpture will be unique. But for the present I bear an acid scorching. Its green fire burns my veins. Therefore, I do not say anything to you. The brown of the season becomes me. Pain causes some to retreat fearfully to their holes. Whereas I am given to scattering into a myriad particles. I have been scattering with these falling leaves, these whirling winds, in this mist that obscures one's path.

TWENTY-FOUR

How much can a person articulate? If one can understand its heart, silence is the most powerful form of speech. You seem to believe something similar. But I don't believe you. How can the existence of something that cannot be said, that cannot

be given a form even after being spoken about, be proved? Our actions and our articulation run parallel. The harmony between them is rare, therefore, such pain. Our love is larger than us, it chips away the corners of our selves, and we experience pain. But along with pain we also experience the largeness of our love. Some, unable to bear the pain, contract their love.

Is this all true? Sometimes I feel that what is true is the given moment. Does not the desire to expand the truth beyond the moment, become the cause of pain? Lila believes that. But perhaps that's Lila's facade. Even shadows grow fluid and connect us, then why don't we have anything that can join one moment to another? Not even death? But I don't deny the value of a moment. Take yesterday for instance; we were unaware but wasn't the shadow of our coming separation hovering behind us? We have no control over what does not possess a body. Therefore separation can come from anywhere at all and stand between us; it grows in the space between our entwined fingers. I was reading, but the distance between two words in a sentence kept growing and I did not realise when my words scattered with a sigh, and your unblinking eyes grew sad, and when I kissed your lips as they struggled to form a word, your sadness became a syllable that spilled from your eyes on to my cheeks. After that everything became weighty — every moment, the sun, the wind, sound. Perhaps to avoid carrying this weight we long for nothingness. But perhaps nothingness is heavy, if it were not so, it would not have been necessary to give it a new name. But for this weight, we could have floated in nothingness. It is not possible to float in nothingness, one can only drown in it. Therefore, we strive to swim with minimum exertion; a line from a poem or two, some lines, but will they carry me away from you? This is what puts a halt to my pen. Slowly it begins to drip silence, I drown.

You are angry. You believe that the sanctity of our love lies in its mysteriousness. But is sanctity so dear to you that you smother our love for it? But I don't ask you this: I sit before you, before your anger, like an accused. I know: the one who loves is inferior and must suffer. This sentence reverberates in my ears, and it reaches a point where the sounds "love" and "suffer" entangle to an extent that they cannot be distinguished. But don't you sometimes feel that this insistence to keep our love mysterious stems from some fear of yours? If love were to unfold and take a form, I doubt if you can bear the form it might assume. Mala — doubt, fear, pain and so much more, orbit love. These malign planets cast their shadow over it and eclipse it. Therefore, the beauty of love cannot come forth, if it were to blossom, the good fortune of seeing it will render malign influences benign. True good fortune is not saubhagya tilak¹ or mangalsutra², but the vision of one's own love in full bloom.

But I don't say this to you because I know that our love is not a mystery for us. Perhaps it has not revealed itself fully. The reason is that it is larger than us. What is large does not reveal itself fully. Its unrevealed part is the mystery, this mystery becomes the pivot of our pain. But Mala, one utterance of fulfillment is enough to render my discourse meaningless. Sometimes I think Arun is right. Arun believes in attainment, not in reaching out. What we attain might even be as tight as a fist, but that has a firmness and a certainty about it. Do we need to add up so many distances to reach out? Can we do this without error? And therefore, you often say irritably: "You have dragged my life into the whirlpool of uncertainty. It has speed, but that speed is blind. It has no destination." We believe that only the straight line of a

predetermined goal is direction. Isn't this an illusion? But doesn't this certainty nullify the direction? We are all uncertain without love, isn't the certainty that love provides desirable?

TWENTY-SIX

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Flowers in bloom, blue sky, golden sunlight, the brown of the dust and toiling women wearing a rainbow of colours — as if many gods had come out for a stroll. Gods cannot be recognised so easily. A thousand years of *tapas*¹ opens up the vision to perceive them. Therefore, what is seen are some stray, colourful lines of their well-defined forms. This *maya*² of colours was accompanied by divine music. This is *maya*. I do not know when I lost myself in this vision. When Lila came up from behind me and pressed her hands on my eyes — I do not know. Lila does not follow the distinction between propriety and impropriety. We have to define the opaque and make it transparent. But Lila does not need that. She ruffled my hair, twisted my nose, turned my face towards her and murmured something like a *mantra*³, in my ears — she did not say anything. With her *mantra*, the *maya* disappeared, the gods vanished, but another *maya* stood in front of my eyes. I do not think about Lila, she does not even take a form of burdensome memory and live in my consciousness. All of us are born out of the balance between being and non-being. Some are weighed down by the burden of non-being. We have to gather the weight of our pain, of our tears and if we can't find that, the burden of our deaths to balance the burden of non-being. But Lila! As if her existence has completely negated all non-being. She does not need balance. To say that, she is because of this, also unnecessarily burdens her. She does not want a measure of time larger than a moment, and that's why I call her *Maya*. Some pain, some nothingness is necessary to make us authentic in this world. Even her eyes

have tears. But they are like dew, perhaps it's happiness. She does not have sorrow enough to relate to her tears. And you? You don't extend your maya. You don't even unfold enough maya to cover yourself. But Maya, by revealing herself creates an illusion. The attraction of truth lies in the shadows that illusion casts on it. Therefore, I want to place your truth and your illusion side by side and watch them. I want to see the power of your fascination.

TWENTY-SEVEN

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I feel hesitant. I shouldn't embarrass you by reminding you what happened yesterday, should I? But for me it was an experience of intense happiness; it is to inscribe it, that I recall it. We were talking, mere talk often disguises streams of thought flowing under a conversation. But there was no such thing then. And suddenly I realised that the stream of conversation was broken or a person other than you had taken over the reins of our conversation. But I can't even say that the other person is not you. Words became light, the eyes fluttered like butterflies, petals of laughter were showered on me — and from you flowed a sea of sensuousness — the pleasures of being immersed in them! No repentance, no rage, not even the usual silence. Dewdrops of pleasure and the play of colours in it. I was stunned. And you kept on speaking light, transparent words. No desire for permanence, nor did I want to hold on to them. I walked out before things changed. There was a touch of sadness in your eyes. I liked even that. I wanted to place the entire universe between us. Not to create a distance. But to render it transparent and to see you from the other side of the transparent universe.

And perhaps that's why I don't have the courage to see you today. The person I am longing for may not be there. But the person there is also mine, isn't she? Must confess that the heart has its favourites. Often you say, giving reasons for not

writing, "I may write at this moment, but what if thoughts change afterwards?" And, therefore, not only do you not write but you also speak so cautiously; every utterance is so conscious. Your caution itself becomes so attractive, do you know this? Therefore, this does not trouble me. You speak and come to realise your vulnerability, you strive harder to be free, this striving hurts us both, we regain composure — a little bit of happiness, hope, illusion.

TWENTY-EIGHT

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Feel feverish since yesterday. Perhaps the fever increased last night. Don't know why but Rilke's line kept coming back to me: you sleep with your eyes shut, unknown to you your hand lies in mine — rose like! My world has shrunk with fever. The eyes remain open, not to see but to shut. Time moves, thief-like. Sunrays tremble in, to be swallowed by the silence of the room. I don't see myself. I can only perceive heat flowing through my veins; intoxicating my blood, setting memories afire. Scorching summer creates mirages on my horizon. A thousand golden deer¹ run past my eyes. Tell me, do you want a blouse made from their skin? How nice it would be if we had been united. Then, your body would have been next to mine. Everything would have become temperate. But you take pride in your cold touch! Often you take my hand in yours and say, "How warm it is, are you feverish?" You say this as an accusation. A cold breeze flirts with my fever. I do not like its playfulness. The heart is struggling to be in harmony with the rhythms of fever. Today I need your cold hands. If a tear were to drop from your eyes on my forehead, it will sizzle and evaporate. I like to experience your presence with closed eyes. Still, having closed my eyes — if you were near, I would not have been afraid of closing my eyes — I would revel in your presence. I like to steal glances at you while you think I've fallen asleep and sit quietly leafing

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through the *Illustrated Weekly*. Fever cleanses the blood. It adds a bit of transparency to it. We can't bear complete transparency. Transparency brings death before us. Should it be a surprise that we cannot bear it? I protect your cold beneath a shroud of fever. Do you know this? Let me know.

TWENTY-NINE

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32

The trees sway in the breeze. Their reflections are inscribed on the glass window. I watch this. The breeze is strong. The fragrance of siris and neem fills the air. Mala is sitting next to me. She has strung mogra flowers in her hair, I recognise her by this. Even she is lost somewhere. I do not feel like speaking. The world of a woman's heart — how unfathomable it is! Perhaps man can love only mysterious women. But often at the heart of mystery lies pain. Lacking the courage to face this pain, to distance ourselves from it, we fence ourselves off. But suddenly someone enters your life and flattens the fence with a single glance. And we come face to face with our pain. Only deep silence can express this pain. If spoken, words lose their meaning. But my silence starts smouldering. What is this pain? Does it exist without a reason? It is merely an environment. I do not feel like waking Mala up. Therefore I watch the havoc that the winds wreak. Everything becomes disorderly. The dust swirls. Dry leaves rush in through the window. The sky that could be seen through the branches of the amli tree outside, can no longer be seen. Often, we have watched that sky in silence. As if we had vowed to watch the sky together. It unnerves me that I cannot see the sky because of the dust. Mala recognises this and asks, "What are you thinking of?" I respond, "Oh, nothing at all." She says, "I can see in your eyes the shadows of so many thoughts." I say, "Then why do you ask me?" She puts her hands on my shoulders and stares at me. And suddenly she says, "To the thoughtful shadows in your eyes, your sombreness, your

sitting by my side and yet being separated by many births. But for tears, how do I —" I don't let her complete the sentence, "No, look here's a smiling face, eyes sparkling with joy, my breath as intoxicated as the winds —" She stops me and continues my sentence — "Words like falling leaves. A secret message moving like a serpent through these words, poison, fire, flames, ash, wind, deluge —" She stops suddenly as though she were choking. And childlike she lay in my lap, her eyes closed. I sat braiding the fast space of her breathing with the drunk rhythm of the winds.

THIRTY

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Lila has brought some magnolias. She arranges them in the flower vase, with that she arranges her bliss, sprig like. Her look asks me whether I like them. I smile in acknowledgement. She comes close to me and places her moist lips fleetingly on mine. Then she sits in front of me. She thinks with cunning eyes as if she were hatching a conspiracy against me. She gets up suddenly and examines my books. She asks, "These days you don't even tell me what you are reading? So much secrecy?" I reply, "Yes, these days I am reading secretly." She asks, "What?" I laugh, "If I tell you that, how will it be a secret then?" She twists my ear as if she were punishing an ignorant child. I free my reddened ear from her grip, "O.K., I'll tell you. Listen, it is a tragic tale. A story not of failed love, not of solitude but of plenitude, of empty happiness — just imagine, two people living in absolute luxury, love at first sight, no obstacles in their path, no anguish, every night a honeymoon, every outing like a picnic — and slowly the pleasure drains away. A parched heart within a spray of laughter, the eyes go dry without tears to wet them, a resounding emptiness in an embrace. A quest for pain, misery in happiness —" She retorted, "What do you think I am?" To irritate her further, I said, "A sweet, smiling doll, whose laughter

never dies." She said, "Now I understand you are jealous of this, isn't it? I am generous. Be my student and I will teach you." I sat at her feet and said with folded hands, "I am your student." She said, "That's not easy. You will need a new sun, a new moon. Words light as butterflies, time that evaporates like camphor, death will play the joker, some stupidity, some foolishness will also be needed . . ."

THIRTY-ONE

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I am tired of waiting. Mala knows that my patience is endless. Doesn't she know that the sharp edge of time pierces me? These burning noon skies roar in my veins like a tiger caught in a forest fire. Deserted roads roll up and become a noose around my neck. The emptiness in my heart grows heavier and heavier. I drown under its weight into something bottomless. The weight of these empty moments trample upon my moments of happiness. I take time in my hands, take apart its warps and wefts and throw them around. How much time I have undone. No, this does not anger me. When Mala comes, all the running around would have made her breathless, she'd be perspiring. I'd caress her back, welcome her with a smile. But with every such moment, a part of my self dies. Does Mala not need this part? As the noose of such thoughts tightens, Mala arrives. She wipes perspiration from her forehead, she collapses in her chair. I don't say anything, can't welcome her with a smile. Absent-mindedly, I look out of the window for a while. She slaps me on the back and says, "You're looking very beautiful!" Coldly I reply, "Men are never considered beautiful, except —" She doesn't let me speak further. Her hands cover my lips. I bite her finger. She shakes me off and says: "Should everything happen according to the rules of your shastra?" I reply, "No, but I do not know when your shastra and mine separated." Rolling her eyes she asks, "What is that you do know? I am contained in your heart,

do you know that?" I am lost in thought. Mala never says, "Yes" or "No," she either shakes her head or makes a soft sound. How has she started saying so much today? My heart trembles with some unknown fear, and the sound of Ajit's scooter becomes one with that trembling. He comes in and asks, "Is Malaben here?" Mala gets up suddenly. She says to Ajit, "I'll be with you in a minute." As Ajit goes out, she pats my cheek and says, "There is no reason to be dumbfounded. He has bought tickets for the matinee show without asking me." She can't think of what more to say. Ajit starts the scooter. Mala leans forward and coos in my ear, "Sorry..."

THIRTY-TWO

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I laugh inwardly. On the outside, I appear serious. It's an assembly. There're ladies and gentlemen. I am about to address the assembly in a scholarly manner. Mala and Lila are here. Lila is laughing with a handkerchief over her face. Mala doesn't like it and scolds Lila off and on. I'm being praised. Like a child who bites curiously into an unknown fruit, I taste this praise and throw it away. Then I speak, and while speaking slip away from this environment. Like a child who builds a house with wooden blocks, I arrange my thoughts. I establish a thought with great effort and then I destroy it by arguing against it. I add a touch of humour somewhere. Sometimes against my wishes I become serious. The pace of sentences becomes slower, feel as if I am going against the current. I can see no one before me, the serpent of solitude bites and now I don't speak, I scream; people clap thunderously and applaud me. I feel as if I am hurled from my body. Except a web of thoughts, there is nothing in my head. Whose teardrop is captured in it? How it sparkles! I become dumb. I don't say anything. The assembly is attentively waiting for my words. I fold my hands in acknowledgement and sit down. There's a garland around my neck, a bouquet in my hands. Lila comes

and says, relieving me of the burden, "What a dramatic end!" Mala doesn't speak. But even in the crowd she has entwined her fingers in mine. I accept such a pleasurable claim of belonging! Lila carries on speaking, "You play the role of speaker very well. This helplessness, solitude, collective death hovering over the world, faceless men, all this is spoken of with such painful trembling and for a moment one is tempted to believe in it —" Mala interrupts her and asks, "But isn't it true? Is it only a mask?" Lila is startled for a moment but says quickly, "This is enough to entice someone as gullible as you." She takes a rose from the bouquet and puts it in her hair. And says, "For me this is the truth of your lecture." She laughs, I see that Mala is serious. The crowd is thinning, as soon as we are alone, she clings to me. Her eyes are filled with tears, choking on her words she says, "You won't be lost somewhere, far away from me, will you?" I catch a teardrop on my finger and reply, "Have I ever been further than where you have kept me?"

THIRTY-THREE

Night. The darkness is fiery. It hisses like an angry serpent. Its tongues of flame are the dances of ghosts. Solitude is offered into this fire like ghee. My breath becomes a glowing ember. The dormant fire within my blood is rekindled. So many forests of solitude are ablaze! Only I remain, like the writing on a charred paper. Waiting for the winds to scatter it. This fiery bridge connecting the heavens to the earth, is the sun. Doesn't it even bridge two hearts? Doesn't it know what is born in the hearts of the other? Mala, in this embrace of fire by being one with it, even I have become the sun. But remember, my existence is like the writing on a charred paper. It cannot be made to suffer more. Even one teardrop can turn it to ashes. No, don't speak a word. The trembling of words can be life threatening. But what shall we do with

the beating of your heart? Will you be my companion in death, the bride of my funeral pyre? Will you be united with me by fire? In this fire of darkness, the bones of time are blazing. The wind blows the ashes of the charred moon afar. The sun is filled with black fire. Can you play this game of stringing together embers of darkness? Can one be intoxicated by the night's bright fire of darkness? There are no burdens now. How the burden of my passions irritated you! But now, you just have to blow and I will turn to ashes and scatter. Tell me, do you want to undertake this magic? Or will you collect my ashes in an amulet and wait for a saint to bring me back to life? How my words irritated you! Nothing can be written in the script of ash. This fire of darkness brings all to light, all mysteries, yours and mine. Its flames roar in my eyes like waves in a sea. Death has become like a dot of kohl. This godless infinity forgetting the limits of the human heart, does not contract its body. You retreat at the slightest touch! You don't look at things open eyed. Even your touch is so frightened, there is an apprehension that it will run away any moment. What will become of you, if this tide of dark fire touches you? Sometimes, startled by my touch, don't your eyes scold me? Perhaps fire resides in my touch unknown to me. Don't the cool sandalwood groves conceal the burning poison of a snake? Have you ever counted the number of snakes living in an empty heart?

THIRTY-FOUR

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The train is moving along. Lila cannot sleep. Mala is asleep. I am so far from her, that even her dreams are not frightened by my shadow. She has escaped to the island of sleep. When awake, she cannot run away as far as she desires. As if, all her life she has cultivated this quality of being elusive. Lila has thousands of stories. She tells fairy tales as if she is pacifying a child. She turns me into the prince of the fairy tale; or

sometimes she gathers the demons. She enacts the stories. She laughs aloud. Her eyes are alive. The burden of seven births lifts from me. I sit savouring the lightness. Lila touches me lightly like a wisp of breeze and slips away. Her eyes begin to close even as she is talking. She rests her head on my shoulder and mutters incoherently into my ears: "Love of seven births, crossing the seven seas, astride a flying horse..." She doesn't complete the sentence. Her lips remain half open, her eyes shut. I close my eyes but I am miles away from sleep. As if my heart is a hundred yards away and beats by itself. Can the armour of Mala's slumber be pierced? Can one enter her dream world? I run my hand over her cheeks. I caress her earlobes. I touch her bowlike upper lip. She slowly opens her eyes. Her eyes are intoxicated with sleep. I like them. I ask her, "How many dreams did you see?" She said — "Guess?" I replied, "Seven." She retorted, "Why only seven, why not seven thousand?" She gets up, leans over me and rests her head on my chest. She looks at me wickedly and laughs and says, as if to mollify me, "Why? Did you feel bad?" She pinches my nose and says, "Your nose is very long, shall I shorten it?" Mala never talks so lightly. Lila always advises me, "Don't harass her. She won't allow her old wound to heal." That's why I am cautious. But does Lila know that I cannot bear the wounds of caution? Mala says, "Look, I will tell you the story of my dream. Don't tell anyone. A large palace. There was singing and dancing, but I could only hear the sounds, no faces were visible. I was wandering alone. Then, someone would float past me, unseen. I was frightened. I started running around. Then, someone called my name. I walked in that direction. I reached the steps of the well, the calling continued. I went into the water. It's cool currents encircled me. Its coolness touched my face. On waking, I realised that those were your fingers!"

Not even a particle of me endured. From where does this destruction come, again and again? From the innocent eyes? From the body that even fears touch? From two lost tears? Disembodied I am flung afar, neither a shadow nor an echo. The water mourns the troubles of the past ages. The sightless wind tumbles along. The dumb gestures of deaf constellations wander in the sky. I, who could be contained in the embrace of two arms, have so expanded that only nothingness can contain me. My consciousness alone has not died out. It burns with hopeful memories. Mala, having crossed the atmosphere of your world, I wander in the orbits of the planets. And still, my longing and your memories do not let my consciousness die. Now there is no medium between us. You have never liked the distance of mediums. Happily I would say, "Dearest!" and you would say with irritation: "Why do we need the obstacles of such adjectives?" Therefore, I even stopped addressing you in my letters. I entered this world with some self-respect, some pride. Even that pride is no more. I can lose everything now, you would retort: "For you there is no less pride in losing!" So be it! Mala, haven't you ever worried about losing me? Are you capable of loving only those who have no memories, no name, no time? In the moments of an embrace, whose memories do your closed eyes expel from the threshold of your heart? Surrounded by my questions you sit quietly, speechless. Slowly even my questions lose their speech and why do our paths still intersect birth after birth? I saw you the other day, it was Monday. You moved in a circle round the tulsi¹, turned towards the sun, offered water, and prayed. I know, you will never tell me what you were praying for. You only say this much, "I want merit. It will be useful someday." I don't have even the burdens of sin, which

can jolt me out of this vacuum. Are you still afraid of one who no longer inhabits your world? Breaking the vice-like grip of time, I turn to dust. Perhaps, from a distance you must be watching it glow. But in that sense, you must be watching a great deal: a line of ants walking on the window panes, a chameleon sitting with unblinking eyes, water dripping from a half closed tap, sounds of street vendors, an eagle circling far above...

T HIRTY-SIX

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The fiery banks of the Tapi in the month of Vaisakh. Four funeral pyres alight in the distance. I know this land. Do you remember, how I dragged you here once? I wanted to float away with the water. You were unmoved. It was good that Lila was with us, since in any case I have no right to your hand. As you kept hesitating Lila pushed you into the water. The water filled your nose, eyes. In panic you thrashed around, your hands seeking support and I quite naturally took hold of them. And then in those cool waters how angry you grew! You were on the verge of bursting out but Lila's splashing more water on you did not allow you to do so. Agitated, you withdrew from us and took cover behind some rock. You have been doing this all your life. How you sit unravelling the solitude of many births! But you idiot, there is no rule that solitude ought to be unravelled in solitude. Even the sweetness of water melons did not move you to utter a sweet word. Lila urged you to sing. You were lost while you sang the song of the wayfarer, a favourite of mine. Today, I seek its melody in this searing wind. That stone in the Mahadev temple. It is believed that if one makes a wish on it as one tries to lift it, and it does, the wish is granted. Immediately Lila began to lift it, and you? You too wanted to do so, but I asked you, "What is your wish?" Angrily you replied, "Why should I tell you, are you Mahadev?" If this was not enough,

you sent me out of the temple. "I will not tell Mahadev of my wish in the presence of anyone, and certainly not in the presence of any man." It's as though the curse of my banishment still burns this searing afternoon. Lila embraced me from the back. She surrounded me like the rushing waters of a stream. She smiled contentedly and said, "I have attained my wish." Perhaps you heard that. You picked up a snake skin for the bushes and kept looking at it, but did not speak at all. You looked very beautiful in the red light of the setting sun. But worlds separated you and me. I have been searching for you in the worlds crafted with my words, and you continue to hide. But what will you do if some day it is your turn to search for me? The Tapi has receded to the opposite bank. It sparkles like a film of tears. When I covered your footprint in the sand with mine, you asked angrily, "Why did you erase my footprint?" I asked, "Why, is someone searching for you?"

T HIRTY-SEVEN

41 ..

I hide in the mists of unknown cities, shedding my name. I sit listening to the sounds from a juke box in a restaurant. At midnight I hear the conversations between the clock towers of the city. In the distance there is a river-like tearful eyes. I strain my ears to hear its flow. Drum beats of jazz. Ringing of ankle bells. I watch ghosts roam under the shadows of street lamps. I am drunk on this meaninglessness. I sit for hours together. Some unknown woman seats herself next to me — she tries to entice me with her sparkling eyes, her honeyed talk; I sit talking to her. I bring alive the little doll in her, I make her laugh so heartily that the tears flow. A deep sigh drowns all words. She wants to see my wounds. I have no desire to discuss my wounds with anyone. Moreover, my wounds are shy. Their red corners burn. This burning pain warms me even in my sleep. Because of it I never feel lonely. I have come here to collect a few words. I watch forms move behind the closed

42 window. I watch curtains fly in the breeze. I connect the two. I collect the silent sighs from the stairs of tall buildings. In shops, flowers sit with their heads drooping. I glean with care the incomplete words from their mouths. Cars rush past, I commit to memory, lines from their lights. And suddenly a question strikes my ears. Where does that question come from? From the gaping mouth of a blind beggar? From the vagina of a prostitute? From the sky, crammed into a hole by houses? From the air squashed by crowds running on the railway station? Who knows! Houses bend under some weight. Rags of sky are floating around. Phosphorus from the bones of time awakens the phosphorus in my bones. I hear a poster, about to peel off its wall, abuse the wind. The eye of a discarded fish head laughs. Death with a bloated jowl is scheming to drink from people's veins. A cat jumping from one roof top to another disrupts the words connecting in my mind. Wide eyed it is dreaming of mice. But whose dreams pass by silently like a coffin? A beautiful princess and a flying carpet sparkle in the neon light of the theatre. The iron bridge, shouldering weight on its Dadhichi¹ like bones screams at midnight. Where is the half-open bud of jasmine?

THIRTY-EIGHT

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Mala asks, "Why are you staring at me?" I reply, "I am reading your future." She asks me like a curious child. "Tell me, what do you see?" I say, "A large bungalow. A young, handsome man steps out of a car in the porch. His name has four letters. The last letter is T, the first P." She stops me, "What did you say? Last letter T and first letter P? O.K. What else?" I say, "Why, were you making sure that it was not I?" She pinches my thigh and says, "Don't fool around. I am more interested in my future. What next?" "A woman of unblemished beauty is clinging on to his arm. Her name is Mala. With a spring in her step she climbs the stairs. Mala trips. The handsome man

supports her and asks in a concerned voice, 'Someone must be thinking of you, who could it be?' Mala laughs, 'There is an evil man who thinks of me, causing me to trip.' The young man's face falls. Mala taps him lightly on his cheek, and speaks with playful eyes, 'He remembered and I got to lean on you. To get your support I would not mind falling all the time.' Hearing this the young man smiled, Mala suddenly becomes serious. Both of them go inside the house. The servants come running. Phone call after phone call from friends. Suddenly a particular call startles Mala. Her husband enquires, 'What happened to my darling?' The servants ask, 'What happened to madam?' But Mala would not speak. The husband asks, 'Did someone kill himself over you?' Mala responds, 'Why do you speak of such things?' The husband asks impatiently, 'Then what happened?' She says, 'There was someone —' The husband asks, 'Who? His name?' Mala echoes the question, 'Name? What was his name? Oh! I can't even remember the name!' The impatient husband says, 'Forget the name, what about him?' Mala says, 'Much fame has come his way. His book was praised!'

43

Mala now wagged her thumb at me and says, "No, No. His Lordship was talking about *my* future but what he wanted to say was that, he is going to be famous one day. You will be." "So what?" I said, "I gave you so much — a car, a bungalow, a handsome youth, and you're envious of my fame?" Mala said angrily, "Why should I be envious? But if you are hoping to be a thorn in my side because of your fame..." I laugh, "This does not suit a pativrata¹ like you." Mala laughs, "You give me a husband and I become his pativrata. My life won't move without your bidding, will it?"

THIRTY-NINE

A still pond. Tonight even the breeze does not cause its water to ripple. Glow worms do not relieve the darkness. Darkness, water and

silence become one. Out of them extends infinity. I do not know why, but out of that infinity comes fear. Whenever I encounter fear, I feel death lurking somewhere. Often I wonder and stop at the signs of death. I write one word after another, they join together, gain form, a meaning and in them I see a shadow. Whose shadow is that? Don't we perhaps play these tricks to come face to face with that shadow?

As I think of those things, Lila's hands caress my eyes. I understand her unspoken question and reply, "No, I am not asleep." She poses a counter question, "Then?" I only see an outline of her body in this darkness. I wonder therefore, when she asks these questions, how this question must reflect in her eyes? I imagine her lips parting as she speaks. As I take time to respond, she sneaks closer and turns my face towards her. I ask, "What did you see? Can you see anything?" She replies, "Yes, I see a great deal. There is a woman. She has a tiny mole on her chin. Her eyes are partially open. She is trying to say something, but the lips will not permit it. The upper lip presses down on the lower lip. The word that has been pushed aside is lurking in the eyes." I speak, "This is interesting. Is the woman alone, or is there someone with her?" Lila laughs, "I knew you would ask this. Yes, there is someone with her. And it's a man. What next?" I reply, "I understand the rest." Lila speaks softly in my ears, "No, I do not see either the pond or the sky. God hasn't gifted me with the ability to contain so much. Your suffering is —," I tell her, "If you know my suffering, why don't you redeem me?" She speaks with uncharacteristic seriousness, "All my attempts have been in vain." I ask her, "So, you have given up hope?" She replies, "No, but the woman who gives birth to a man, cannot contain him in her. Lighting a lamp at dusk, the woman wishes to grip him in the tight embrace of that light, but he is not present. Like a bird of the seas, he is out somewhere." Laughing, I say, "Lila, you speak like Sharadbabu's heroine." Childlike she enquires, "Will Sharadbabu make me his heroine?"

A new place, new air, new sky. Perhaps even to Mala I seem new. As if she has never seen me before. She asks about me with curiosity, "Do you like this flavour? Do you like that?" These are small matters. At such moments I even start liking myself. Since childhood, I have been wreaking revenge on myself. It's only today that some love for the self has been rekindled. The sea is close by. Mala does not allow me to get up from the beach till late at night. She drenches me, as if she herself is the sea. She does not let me be by myself at all. The moment I sit down to write, she snatches the pen away. She asks me in mock anger, "How many women have you hurt in your stories? That's enough now." I say, "What about men?" She replies, "I don't care about men. Suffering is a part of their valour. For them, suffering itself is valour." I tease her, "But, it is women who enjoy the grandeur of suffering — Sita¹, Damayanti²." She speaks impatiently, "Enough, the burden of grandeur has broken our backs. Now, let us jump, dance, fly." I want to feel lighter and so I tell her, "I won't let you fly." She embraces me and says reassuringly, "Don't be afraid of unreal fears. It's another matter if you make me fly." I pull her ears, she lets out a mock scream. She suddenly asks, "Have you now forgotten Arun, Ramesh, Amal or not?" I reply tersely, "They are all good people. I have respect for those who know enough to love you." She is enraged, "Who loves me? Even you, have you been able to love me?" I do not feel like answering this. My fingers stray on her cheeks. She asks, "Why don't you answer me?" I say, "I have written the answer on your cheeks." She bites my finger. I ask, "Mala, have you never been jealous? Lila —" She interrupts me, "You do not understand either Lila or me. I have read somewhere in one of your stories that without jealousy the

passions of love cannot be proved. But that is wrong, a thousand times over." I reply, "Today, I am ready to accept defeat." She retorts, "Yes, today you can afford to do so because I am alone here. Assume that Amal, Arun come here —" I speak as if I have not heard that at all, "Today, the tide is at 4 o' clock. Don't you want some tea now?" She puts her head in my lap and says closing her eyes, "For a man, a woman is a prize of solitude. He doesn't let her out; even the sun cannot cast his eyes on her." I reply, "But here, the seas embrace you, the winds unclothe you, the sun kisses every part of your body." She opens her eyes, looks at me and asks, "And you?" I lean over and kiss her lips. She suddenly gets up and says, "Let's go, the tide is here."

FORTY-ONE

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I do not know the origin of sadness. The passing hours bring moments of pain. Suddenly, the eyes stop seeing. The heart sinks. Time's dragging feet inspire pity and slowly they collapse with fatigue. It weighs on me. Space contracts, veins bulge. The heart pants under the effort of many births. Mala, today I am not bringing you back to memory, I do not want my sadness to stain your face. I have only words. Today, I need words that bear space. How many such words have you given me? Is a bird born with its own piece of sky? Sometimes I hear your words greedily. I am going to need all such words of yours. Today, seated in the shadow of sadness, I try to bring back to life your words: some like a crest of light on a fount of laughter, others filled with the aroma of gardens, some gushing like fountains, yet others like the forest expanding up to the end of the earth. Like the cave sketches of ancient man, this sadness cuts deep into the heart sculptures of darkness. I do not recognise these sculptures. I am not enamoured by this sadness. But, watching this sadness expand in my heart, you slip away from me. You are afraid

of it. You shiver like a newly emerging bud. Frightened by my passion you run away. If you knew, how in your absence these passions scatter me, you would not run away just to protect yourself. When I gather myself and stand up, after bearing all these, and look for your hand, so far I found it close by. You erase all shadows of deep sadness and still your eyes look at me with an unspoken question: how dare sadness come to me in your presence? Where would this sadness have found a foothold if you had not kept some moments vacant, free of your presence? Therefore, I do not mourn my empty moment because they are all filled with your touch. The meaningless effort of doing stops. I like very much, the singing of some unknown bird in the cool solitude of hills, a human form disappearing into a dot far away, a silvery stream falling, tumbling from the hill and especially your eyes which churn the sky and the seas together. I turn to nothing in the infinity of your body. After that I do not hear the cacophony of my breathing. When I watch the glow of fulfillment on your face, I feel that I might have come here just for a vision of it. Today's meaningless sadness, it's increasing burden, my disappearing form — their only hope is your magic. 47

FORTY-TWO

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Deserted river banks, barrenness of hill tops, nothingness foaming with crowds of people, give my heart no respite. I keep doing things, keep speaking for fear that if there was a small gap, nothingness would rush in. I am striving to attain nothingness that can contain my emptiness and be enriched by it. But doesn't this striving itself push love far away? Lila laughs — doubts about intense love, and absence of love in doubt! How difficult it is to be natural! I am jealous of Lila. Doesn't she ever suffer? Doesn't the lack of something trouble her? What does she understand of love? Sometimes I feel like asking her these questions. But I cannot bear Lila's seriousness. I long

for Mala, but my longing does not bring her any closer. Perhaps a woman like Mala can be attained only through a distance. But why speak of this? And Lila! Without making me aware of her existence she envelops me, perhaps it is for this reason that I do not recognise the uniqueness of attaining her? But why should this be so complex? This pain gives me no repose. Every time I part from Mala, the parting hurts as if it is the final separation. This makes Mala uneasy. When I see her after years, she meets me as if the years had not gone by. Has she no desire to live only through attaining me? I create my own world. Is there no other possibility available to me? I ponder over these things. Lila has pushed aside the curtain and is standing at the window. She is looking at the morning mist with great keenness. I ask her, "What are you looking at?" "Mist," she replies. I say, "Mist is a cover, it envelops. What is there to look at?" She replies, "But it is so amusing to imagine what would be revealed when this cover disperses. Don't you enjoy it?" "If it is to be really enjoyed, one must pray that the mist should never disperse," I replied.

48 She laughs, "Yes, unknown to ourselves you and I pray for that. But someone as vain as you, would not accept that." I get unreasonably angry, "But aren't you yourself dew-laden mist?" She looks at me, "Oh! do you know me at all?"

FORTY-THREE

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I do not know why for days after that I waited for Mala. Memories of that day fill my mind. Did not even go out of the house. I sat, complicating the world of a novel. Doesn't writing sometimes become self-flagellation? But the self is at least occupied with the causing of pain. Suddenly one evening Mala arrived. Usually I talk a great deal, but that day I could neither welcome her nor chastise her. She set about scrutinising my room. All the clutter in it. As if she was taking a note of all the days she was absent. Even in trivial matters Mala is endearing.

Without my asking her, she made tea. She responded to all my letters. For her, it was not necessary to acknowledge my presence in these things. Slowly the darkness grew dense. She sat close to me. She didn't usually sit so close. As if she is shielded by impenetrable distance. Maybe, that is a compulsion? Will I ever be so close to her that I need not utter a single word? If I had spoken that evening, I would have told her all the unspoken things of the years, but somehow that evening there was no need for words. Our quiet, still, pond-like hearts captured the shadows of many births. That evening these thoughts came to my mind: if we disperse the web of societal bonds, only one thing seems true, that our relationship does not need any familiar signs. Mala might have been lost in a crowd of people unknown to me, might have stayed away from me for years, or might have married someone else, but the threads of this relationship cannot be broken by either her or me. Might not the pain that we experience be one form of the realisation of this relationship? As I sat thinking this, Mala's usually restrained fingers lost their fears and touched my forehead. As if they were searching for something, they moved down and caressed my eyelids. Suddenly, driven by some uncontrollable passion her arms encircled me. Her eyes pinned about me were not silent either. Those eyes and her touch, were together singing some melody, a divine music that filled the surroundings. I felt that Mala in the form of music was becoming one with me. As the denseness of that experience was becoming almost unbearable, she left leaving the imprint of her silent lips on mine.

FORTY-FOUR

Mala, doesn't death itself torment our love? I often experience death very closely. Only a breath separates me from it. I can easily jump across. When I stand face to face with death and look at it closely, I realise that it has stolen, perhaps to entice me,

the familiarity of your features. Hasn't death woven itself into the tapestry of the memory of your touch? Haven't your tears and your silence nourished my death? Mala, I am not scolding you. This lonely evening I slowly dissolve as I sit amidst the noises of the city. This pain is not acid. I would not even say that this dissolving is a pleasure. This experience contains so much — perhaps death would be an unbearable collection of experiences. But Mala, I get frightened. When we speak of pain in the plural, we do not merge them, we name each one of them, we associate them with different people. But death makes them indistinguishable. Sometimes death wishes to do us a favour by relieving us of the burdens of these differences. It raises its hands to erase everything. Initially, I like the experience. But as I watch all forms being erased, frightened, I shrug death off. And yet, we will not only have to make this fear bearable but also welcome. The touch of an unfamiliar land, the winds of distant places and darkness painting infinity into the eyes — all these frightened me. If I can collect these memories, perhaps death would not be so unfamiliar after all. But Mala, can't we be together in this experience? Death includes everyone, but in that collectivity will we be in a position to say "We?" You will not agree to this. Often, when separation from you is difficult and child-like I strive to make it bearable, you say — as if it is imperative to catch the 5:25 train and looking in the direction of the road, without even looking at me — "See you, then," and walk away so easily. I move forward so that people do not see me, and then I stand watching your form disappear in the crowd. Does something similar happen in death? How pleasant it would be if death was to be captured behind your closed eyes? Then I could befriend your tears and sometimes I could even cajole you to let me drop from your eyes. Have you ever been able to contain either me or your tears?

Lila asks, "What if I get married?" I laugh, "I'll bless you, May you be the mother of eight sons." She becomes serious and asks, "Are you so eager to marry me off?" Hearing this I become thoughtful, and speak after a while, "Come on Lila, let's find a good husband for you." As if eager to participate in a conspiracy she says, "Yes, let's find a good husband." Then she asks, "What about Mala?" I reply, "Mala may have married someone in her mind." She is perplexed, "Does he live in her thoughts or does he emerge sometimes?" I reply, "How do I know that?" Lila is pensive. I ask, "What! Did you have a vision of a husband?" She says, "You're jealous, I was about to grab him and you —" I say, "Will you be able to grab him so easily?" She replies in mock anger, "Not everyone is as evil as you." I say to tease her, "Good, at least I am saved. Since I am evil, I'll be off your list, won't I?" She smiles sadly. "Oh! that made you very happy, didn't it?" I tell her, "Even if it hurts me, hurts me intensely, how can I bear your marrying an evil man?" She says with disdain, "You were born to be kind, weren't you?" I do not answer. She says, "You need not worry. The search for a husband is on. All the rituals of seeing and meeting a boy will be undertaken. If you watch this farce from a distance, you will enjoy it." I say, "You will be caught soon. Very soon Mrs. Lila will be seen with her head covered, playing with her mangalsutra." She pinches me, "Is there courage in predicting someone else's future?" I reply, "But Lila, I see everything clearly, someone gifted but child-like, someone who can be played with, famous all over the land, and still greatly valuing yours words —" Lila says, "Stop it, now." Then she says, "Often I think, how nice it would be if we did not have to marry, but —" I ask, "But what? Why do you accept defeat so easily?" Suddenly she comes alive,

"So, will you help me win?" I blurt out, "In such matters you can't win with the help of others." She says angrily. "How wicked!"

FORTY-SIX

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52 **W**aters of many rivers, the distant bluish tops of many mountains, the soliloquy of unknown forest leaves, the melancholy of cities filled with people — all these have broken me. In childhood, while playing with friends, suddenly some thought would take possession of me and I would go off and sit somewhere, melancholy. As if for many births someone is saying something repeatedly to me. Often I hear that voice like a distant echo, but sometimes it comes very close and says something. I do not understand that language. But then I feel like a refugee within myself and experience a certain unfounded helplessness. It is possible that at such moments, happiness might have turned away from my door. Later, the withered image of that happiness keeps troubling me. It is not that I have no desires, but I have not found anything which can hold together, my existence that turns to vapour and scatters. This intense pain is perhaps my wealth in this life. Therefore, Mala when life's bonds suffocate you, I feel that you do not understand my pain at all. I want to be bound by you. Only by tying me down, will you be bound. Do you fear that this might threaten your freedom? And therefore, despite longing to be bound to you, I go far away after meeting you, lest I create an obstacle in the path of your freedom. While going away, I know that we will not meet again at the same point. During the days of our separation, this sun, these winds, this environment makes you so unfamiliar! Every moment erases your face, but from behind it a new face blossoms. When I meet you after a long time, it feels as if many births separate us. The watch in your room recognises you more closely. I sit like a stranger, knocked around by your

dear ones. I bear some new wounds, and the moment of parting comes, but I don't know which breakers cast me again on your shores. Do you sometime lose your eyes to the horizon, because of some unknown pain? Perhaps we are not destined to have love which can be arranged, decorated in the warmth of a small house. What at one moment comes as close as a tear in the eye, at the next, sparkles like a distant star.

FORTY-SEVEN

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Turning moments into cowries Lila plays with them. I sit watching that play. Her moments are not burdened by Time. But isn't a moment sometimes filled with infinite nothingness? What does she do with such moments? Her time scatters like drops from a fountain. Where does she have the space for gathering the heavy, still darkness of some heart? She even sets the sun afloat by turning it into a colourful bubble. One can't forge bonds with her. And still she lives in society. Can she remain completely untouched? Can she be untouched by pain? In essence, Lila is not a problem. Perhaps I try to catch her in the web of my own making. How difficult it is to accept someone other than the self? Many say that acceptance is not possible without dissolution. If the unblemished wholeness of acceptance becomes one with us, what is the scope for the pain of dissolution? But the heart does not allow anything to be simple. I long for Mala. Lila is unattainable. Thus, neither of them is likely to make self-immolation a necessity. Perhaps for this reason, simultaneously I long for both. But often I feel that they mingle indistinguishably with one another. Tears and smiles after all speak of the same thing. Lila came as I was thinking of these things. With her came her laughter. Her words flew around like butterflies. Her touch clung to me like petals. Even my barrenness came to life. Creation withdrew into the confines of the eyes, no poles, other than the ones within the expanse of two hands

could be seen. Moments passed like the drops of rain falling from a wire. Every moment a new pattern emerged. But do such moments dissolve what is deep within our existence and cause it to flow away? Has its weight disappeared? Can we do without ballast? Perhaps Lila does not recognise such questions. But that is my guess. Some questions are raised only within the special environment of my heart, can the atmosphere of two hearts ever become one? Or do such attempts unleash tornadoes? My eyes must become misty with such questions. Lila saw this and asked, "Have the skies become overcast?" I replied, "In your presence — how long can they be so?" She asked, "Do I exist? Where am I?" I asked, "Even you shoulder the weight of such questions?" She replied, "It is not to be borne voluntarily. Some give us questions, some others love." I do not know why but I became angry. "Can anyone give love? Love blossoms, love grows, love that is given —"

A little flower achieves union with the elements of nature through its fragrance. As a child I grew up with flowers. Only the chatter of flowers saved me from the silence of the house. Therefore, Mala, I have always seen you as an unnamed forest flower which speaks through its fragrance. But you have an independent existence. However hard we strive neither the separate existence of the other nor the self can be penetrated on the basis of this difference. But I have seen that I am not capable of doing this. I have also offered myself as an oblation to someone else's intense desires. But no one wants these oblations. Here, no one allows us to completely dissolve. Here people have use for only parts of ourselves. They tear off these parts and take them away. If existence with its rented body cannot for a moment forget this pain, why should that be a surprise! Others don't accept this. People mock me since

I use words like “nothingness,” “solitude,” “tears,” “death” again and again. I know that there is no malice in this mockery but is this knowledge enough to give us solace? Unknown to us, how cruel we grow? We want our bodies to contain a taste, we want a separate name, we don’t want anything to merge; but what is it that we wish to taste? Of the experience of infinity of being? Mala do you know where I am sitting now? It is evening. Evenings are very hard for me. I cannot stay at home. Therefore, I come out. Facing me, the ocean. We are separated by a crowd of people. I do not see any face. I only see shadows lengthen. Sitting in a restaurant I see the sea and the horizon merge. To meet, one must expand. And Mala, expanse is distance. And that’s why we are frightened. How frightened the heart is when the hand slips out of another hand, the road forks and even sight retreats! Then, even memories are useless. Mala, the wind is strong. So strong that your face would be covered by the flowing locks of your hair. The breeze is audacious. Ultimately you have to seek my help. That’s why I like the breeze. It makes you somewhat helpless. If shame is a woman’s ornament, then even helplessness would be. Don’t get irritated, I say this to tease you. Love is not for the helpless. Far away, waves crash on the rocks, their foaming white water is offered in prayer. Are you accepting their offering? How the white foam sparkles in the black stone of your necklace! I watch it and do not speak at all. Slowly the prayers of the ocean reverberate in my veins. And you?

FORTY-NINE

My heart has altered its rhythm. My existence has been reduced to a photo frame. Images change in it. These are not familiar. I have nothing to do with them. Whose memories could these be? At the festival time, amidst the comings and goings of many unfamiliar people, I sit in my house like a stranger; it

feels like that: so many unfamiliar faces, their unfamiliar language, unknown hands in my hands, unknown places — days and nights — where all do they drag me! Perhaps at such moments humans long for some anchor, but where is it? To gather the syllables of your name I have to go from one end of the earth to the other. As I attempt to speak your name, it gets sucked into the white frozen silence of the poles. Mala all your tears and your silence are frozen here. There is no sound of running water, no rustle of leaves, no singing of birds, even the darkness here is incomplete. Our being here seems merely like some stains on this white expanse. I perceive the value of words in this silence. How many suns would it take to dissolve this silence? Mala, was it your existence which became the space for the orbit of that solar system? Do the stars, separated by lakhs of miles, address each other in the same way? All questions and all forms of address will resolve in this dense silence. It is possible that some of my utterances might take a new form and drop out from your eyes. It is possible that suddenly some cool touch might startle you like a question. “It is possible, it is possible —” my hope parrots this. But I am not so heartless as to shove aside hope. I have never been able to be so heartless. I have lived believing that at the other end of this expanse of love is you. When my love and your heartlessness come face to face, you will perhaps realise that the screen that separates them is false. I am not ashamed of love. For me it is not a complicated matter. Those who wish to give away everything do not have to either add or subtract, complications arise only for those who want to retain something for the self. Lila does not accept the language of give and take. But we are human, can we breathe outside this language? Lila is divine. We are human and therefore our seemingly divergent paths converge at some point. Therefore, I do not wish to use the word “pain” today. If we can experience ourselves only through pain, won’t pain become our life breath? Today, even I wish to close my eyes and drown in this dark, deep silence. I have no hope that I will dissolve and will become one with it. But if that happens, I am no longer afraid.

Today, creation is bidding a final goodbye. The air sobs. The sunlight tumbles around. The space crushed, pushed by the narrow lanes between houses, screams silently. Windows have smashed their eyes. The ghosts of beheaded words are roaming around. Someone is making a new language by putting together points of countless human beings. The blind sun's fingers search for something. Late in the evening, shall we also return and knock on the door? Will the door open? Who shall we see inside? Perhaps a sigh of goodbye will ring through our ears, will the wind close the doors? Will the trembling flames of street lamps flap in the evening like the tongue of a witch? What words will it be uttering? Today, even water is running scared. Like a blind snake trying to find its hole, the water runs to hide. It is trying to shorten the shadows of trees. A dust storm, moving in a circle mutters some unknown chants. Forests flee. In a moment they will walk over the city. A small insect bids a resting God goodbye. Will that bring a tear to the eyes of that God? Amidst all these what desires make me utter your name? Therefore, I tell you that you cannot go away from my words. I am seated amidst pacing feet. But those footsteps do not disturb the chanting of your name. Therefore I can watch its melancholy from a distance. I am unable to erase this melancholy and have all my life searched for a few words to make it bearable. I have never believed that these words have created a distance between us. Even when removed from this world, do we not have to bear the light of the sun and the moon? Don't we need to see with the help of that light? I might feel satisfied with the world as reflected in your eyes, but how can I limit your vision? And still, the moment you go out of the confines of my two hands, some infinite melancholy

reverberates through my heart! But if you hear it once, you will never ever want to be even an inch away from me. Mala, our strivings to be one — as a drop of water becomes one with water — will perhaps extend to many lives! Therefore, despite my impatience I have never been so audacious as to change the course of your feet (your fair feet — how dear they are to me). I was not the first to hold your hand, it was not towards me that your feet moved for the first time; the memory of this is also a curse. It continuously burns within my veins. But have I ever singed you?

EPILOGUE

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Mala was uncurious about the world that the misty drizzle hid. She wished to disappear into the mist and be invisible even to herself. She closed her eyes. The world presented itself to her as disparate noises. With them mingled the hazy forms from the world of her heart. She did not want to recognize any of these. Still, like the dust storm, and the silence of the summer afternoon these forms spiralled around her. The solitude in the midst of these forms was unbearable. Unbearableness does not end. We are dragged along by it. As the coil of smoke from an extinguished lamp grows thinner and thinner and becomes one with darkness, would that our consciousness also lose its uniqueness and be one with something! But that seems to have never happened. Even the vessel of death may be too small to contain our consciousness. That's why a new world of ghosts comes into existence. Even with death where does the matter ever end?

59

The wheels of the racing engine — speed itself — were they not hooting with laughter! Ashok tries again and again to drag Mala into the conversation: about the films seen together, about picnics and such like. Mala is interested but briefly, but soon feels that she cannot recognize the Mala who played a part in those events. She was unwilling to allow this to go on and prepared to argue and quarrel to prove that even that Mala was herself. Bitter with her own efforts, she looked through the window made hazy by rain. In the distance were traces of a large station, many lamps, red and green signal points, the changing rhythms of trains. The train stops at the station. Strange noises and forms again surround her. Ashok went out and stood on the platform, talking through the window. Often he grabbed Mala's hand. Mala sat lifeless but continued to follow the conversation. Ashok was very

attentive, making attempts to cheer her up. He spoke without pause about places one could visit from the station, famous things one could see, about friends living in that city. Meanwhile Lila had reached the far end of the station.

Suddenly Ashok spotted a familiar face. Although he was a stranger to Mala, Ashok dragged him towards her. Ashok liked to keep pointing out his proximity to Mala. Sometimes Mala got irritated with this habit. Ashok used Mala's irritation to draw closer to her but Mala did not want to do anything which would make this proximity a burden. And perhaps that's why she had not succeeded in keeping Ashok at a distance. She glanced at Ashok who looked smug and self-confident, as if he could achieve anything and was not ready to let go of what he could achieve. And still, there was no insistent demand, "I want this." Mala couldn't understand this strange quality of non-desire. He was the same as he was five years ago when they'd met for the first time. He couldn't be any different. That's why he could enjoy this world. Five years ago that day — Mala didn't want to remember all that. 60 But why was it all coming back today? Her heart started to ache. She wanted to shatter her memory and throw away the bits, no desire now for any relationship. She just wanted to float and not ask whose touch this was and whose face.

Once again the train moved. Ashok sat with a teatray. He prepared a cup and placed it in Mala's hand. Then chatter, chatter, chatter. Mala laughs, talks, becomes serious. But Lila does not let her be. She cannot look into Lila's eyes that seemed to scold her. Mala grew angry. But she had no energy to express this anger. Just to irritate Lila she continued to talk to Ashok. Was that the only reason? How deceitful! Perhaps there was no anger in Lila's eyes. It was only her imagination. Then why was she going? Hadn't she insisted that Ashok went with them? Perhaps for Ashok, this was one more of his many picnics. Perhaps he wanted to take care of Mala. The event had taken place. Why should he bear its burden? Why should what was not there be burdensome? So Ashok did not speak words of solace, did not even mention that event. He cracked jokes and told stories. He organised

food, refreshments. He took an interest in all the small details.

Lila had not grown serious. She was also trying to reduce the weight of Mala's seriousness. Mala thinks: from where does she draw so much strength? Don't any shadows lurk in her heart? Mala also wanted to make everything tolerable. She had never welcomed death, but at a faint, unbidden thought about it the tears rolled from her eyes. Her vision blurred, she choked. Would this blur never ever disappear from her eyes?

("Mala, often you ask me: 'Why do you fall silent? What is the fear in your eyes? Why is it that you can't live in free abandon?' I also feel that I must find answers to these questions: but shall I speak the truth? It is as if while walking on a high mountain path, suddenly strong winds and fog descend and cloud all vision making it impossible for me to feel the presence of the one whose hand I'm holding. A fearful solitude suddenly encircles me. From where do these waves of nothingness come amidst those thronging crowds? Sometimes Mala, don't you lose your vision? Sometimes, when we come face to face with an intense pain, pain which we cannot call our own, that which is nameless, that cannot even be pointed to! I write only to understand this pain...")

61

Who can fight the fog? Is there no other way but to be mist and lose oneself in it? Mala thought that she was not attentive, but she started laughing at Ashok's joke. She felt that now it would go on like this: a couple of events would take place simultaneously, she would not be able to take interest in any one of them and still they would be caused on her account. Mala felt completely exhausted, but the moment she shut her eyes, some unknown fear overtook her. The red of her eyelids turned to flame and enveloped her, she became a red point and flowed, the burning grew more intense. She felt there would be a great explosion any moment, and everything will turn to ashes and scatter. But nothing happened. Mala forced her eyes open. Initially she could not recognize anything of the familiar world. The outlines of forms were not clear, the meaning of sounds could not be grasped. What an effort this involved!

("Mala what happened? Exhausted, are you? Come close to me. Did you roam around a lot yesterday? You said that you would come back by three, rest for a while and meet me at five. But today is the day after. You have rested for a night and half a day, and still you are tired. You still lie with your eyes closed. What shall I say? Even my words disturb you. But Mala, if it reduces your fatigue, put your head on my shoulder and rest.")

62 Mala leaned against the glass shutter, as if she were resting her head on her own shoulder. How the worlds of the inside and the outside mingled in the reflections in the glass! In a similar way she had once traveled by train. Even Ajay had had to travel. But Mala had deliberately not allowed him to accompany her. Later, describing the journey she had written: "You thought that I would be alone in the train... no such thing. Do you know Arun? You must have seen him. He is quite a jolly person. Didn't know how the time passed." Ajay had never brought up this incident. But today Mala remembered something else. Ajay was being given a public felicitation. On such occasions Mala enjoyed teasing Ajay. Ajay participated in such functions only when he had no choice, he never informed his friends about such events. But on that day Mala had insisted on going with him. The night before the function everyone had gathered at Arun's place. Ajay was not closely acquainted with many of them. He was there because of Mala. The others got together and poked fun at literature, art. Ajay sat there like the accused. This went on till midnight, after which they went to sleep. Mala lay sleeping not far from Ajay. Sleep eluded Ajay. He felt as if Mala's hand was searching for his. As he was about to extend his, Arun's hand clasped Mala's. It was as if their hands were woven in a tight embrace. Arun's hands started caressing Mala's face, stroking her breasts. Something pierced Ajay like a thorn. And the next day, at the function, Ajay's words filled with this pain, were so heart wrenching that tears had filled Mala's eyes. Mala started explaining, without being asked to, "That's Arun's habit, even in dreams he does that. I pushed his hands away at least four times," etcetera, etcetera. Mala

could not bear Ajay feeling jealous and behaving like any other average person. Mala was irritated, confused. What was all this? In what manner must Ajay perceive Mala? Mala had always laughed at the male notion of a man being a woman's lord and master. But she herself could not understand why she was behaving the way she was. Was she trying to derive satisfaction from this, because she had not found anything which would get a hold on her life and keep it together? As Mala tried to wipe raindrops from the glass shutter, tears dropped from her eyes. She did not bother to find out whether Lila or Ashok had seen them.

Ajay used to say often. "Mala, let's go roaming to distant places. Today here, tomorrow there. Different climates, different people, different scenes, our very features would keep changing. Every morning we would have to re-familiarize ourselves. Someday we might even get lost." But, wasn't Mala afraid of getting lost? Therefore, when Amal, Ashok, Arun — everyone — called her "Mala," she used to stop worrying about who she was, she continued to remain intact, but isn't that also subject to change? Only those who can accept the fact of this change are honest. But was Ajay, driven by some fear, running away? Wasn't he shattering mirrors lest he see his entire visage? Mala could not understand all this. Could raindrops or teardrops be strung together? Still, she tried to: Mumbai, St. Xavier's College, Marine Drive, first name, Ajay Mehta; second name, Mala Desai; third name, Ashok Patel; fourth name, Arun Parikh; fifth name, Amal Majumdar; sixth name, Lila Shah, she tossed these names like cowries. How did they sound? As if they were total strangers! She rearranged them. She hid some. Outside, the letters on the signboards of the station were scattering against the force of speed. The train was running past without giving them the time to collect themselves. Similarly wasn't Time running past?

College-classroom-seminar-annual function-group dance-poetry reading: she was striving to reach Ajay through this clutter. What was that group called? She smiled, how the memory becomes hazy! Yes, she remembered it: Mischief Mongers. Lila had dragged her there one day. There were

some discussions. "The Death of God," Lila had spoken angrily, Mala had sat silently that day, and heard Ajay for the first time. She was not one to be easily enamoured. She had joined Ashok, Arun and Amal in catcalls and booing.

From the very beginning Amal had nursed a great rage against Ajay: shallow, cussed, stupid, charlatan, versifier — an inexhaustible stock of abuses. And then Ila's suicide. Every finger was pointed at Amal. How far Amal had carried this relationship! Ila had given herself completely to this. Amal had got engaged to a girl of his mother's choice. The next day, Ila ended her life. Ajay had said that such a death turns life into a newspaper item. Jealousy and resentment are obscene, because they destroy the grace of living. Pain was to be endured in silence and solitude, not exhibited.

That day, even in mourning Mala had spoken out, "We will name your beloved pain." He was about to respond but quickly swallowed his words. Lila did not like this. To the extent we torture ourselves, to that degree, consciously or unconsciously we take cruel revenge on others. Perhaps Lila was right. If he had said this on that day, angered by his unspoken words the bitterness that Mala had created could have been avoided. Mala laughed, "Who knows!" echoed through her desolate mind, "Who knows?" Such a response from Mala always irritated Ajay. Mala did not say this to deflect the conversation. Perhaps that was characteristic of her. She wanted to see even herself as some event happening outside of herself. She did not desire more than some blurred lines of herself. Or perhaps she did not have the strength to bear more than that.

Mala did not understand why people nitpicked all their lives. If sparks of jealousy flew around for all sort of inconsequential things, was it really love? If Amal wanting to touch Mala, did so, why should that anger Ajay? Would that touch make Mala Amal's? And if that single touch could make her Amal's, why mourn her loss? But this was not acceptable to Ajay. Amal may or may not win Mala, but why should he lose her? There was no reason to believe that Amal wanted to attain Mala. Then why did Mala create such knots of confu-

sion? This often irritated Ajay. When, once or twice, Mala lost in her own world had not spoken at all, Ajay had snapped irately, "Did you hear at least a single word of what I've been saying?" Mala had replied coldly, "No." Ajay was hurt. If this was not enough Mala had added, "Were you talking to me? I was only a pretext." Therefore, Lila often told Mala, "Mala, there is joy even in being a pretext. But your pride won't even allow this. And if you cannot do without pride, then at least love" — Mala raged, "Love, love, love! Can there be love without pride? That is spineless, obscene flattery." What remains as a result is inexplicable, smothering pain.

The body and mind do not arrive at their destination simultaneously, the body brazenly finds its own pleasure. The mind does not emerge from the confusion of its own making. But doesn't Ajay understand all this? Lila thinks about this. Neither Ajay nor Mala knew about it but Lila ponders a great deal. She had tried to be with Ajay but had never been able to commit the obscenity of enticing Ajay. She couldn't understand why Ajay felt jealous and pained by the shallow relationship that Ashok, Amal and Arun had with Mala. Why couldn't Mala offer her being entirely? Ajay's personality attracted her. She admitted a deep, fundamental relationship with him, even then? Lila stops here. While Ashok talks, Lila thinks such thoughts, and prepares to scold Ajay. And then suddenly she remembers.

65

Outside, there is darkness. The train is running along. Mala, with closed eyes is listening to its sounds as if she were listening to grandmother's tales. To break the bondage of the beating of the heart, of the flow of the veins, to pierce the entangled web of memories, to break the shackles of the muscles, to be free, to disappear — did Ajay desire such freedom? Salvation in the end? No salvation can cause melancholy to disappear. Won't Ajay be hearing the oceans of melancholy roaring today? But something more than this would be happening. Mala accepts responsibility. But so what? That question was meaningless. Whenever enraged, Ajay used to write in Mala's palms, "One who loves is inferior, and must suffer." Mala remembers that and asks angrily, "Who is

suffering now?" Then suddenly she realised. Was he perhaps not striving to save her from this suffering? Questions like angry bees surround her. Sting they would, if they had to.

Ashok and Lila are sleeping on upper berths. The light has been switched off. The train has stopped between two stations. Everything is quiet, except for the distant sounds of the engine. Fatigue closes Mala's eyes for a while. She starts seeing unfamiliar scenes, there are people, but all strangers. She cannot understand what they speak, do. But why is she there? Who is she waiting for? Slowly a crowd of innumerable people encircles her. There is no way out of this. Her hands intertwine with the hands of others. She was surrounded by the sighs of people. She couldn't find an escape. She closed her eyes and stood still. As if turned to particles and scattered in the crowd. Wailing, lamenting nothingness encircled her. Startled, she opened her eyes. The rain had made the glass shutters blurred. Outside lay darkness, straining her ears, she heard the rain.

66 ("Mala look, it's raining. Rain is the sky's soliloquy. Do you hear it? Your eyes cloud with sleep, don't they? While you sleep, holding your lifeless hand in mine, I choke on my sobs. Despite your being next to me, your hand being in mine, how the solitude crushes me! And therefore, I say, Mala wait a while, stay awake with me. Look, the wind is posing a riddle. The raindrops, knocking their tiny fingers on the glass window are telling you something in code. I am also listening attentively to someone from the skies narrate the forgotten story of the last birth. This unbearable pain, let me rest my head on your shoulder for a while, Mala. The raindrops were neighbours of the sun. And still so cool, so fragile! Their play would end and the solitude of the sun would keep on burning. The separation of the sun and the shadow, is there any other separation like that? Mala, aren't your tears also the neighbours of the sun? The raindrops come dancing, skipping with joy and merge with either the earth or the waters. And your tears? The raindrops will awaken the seeds. Their green laughter will sway in vast fields. And countless pearls will fall on tender leaves. Mala, where do your pearls

fall? Where are your green fields? Mala, stop a while, rest your head on me. Let me hear the combined rhythms of the falling rain and your heart beating. Your body, what warmth it has! Keep awake with me today. Let us sustain ourselves for a while like a small island surrounded by slumber and solitude. And then let there be the apocalypse. The winds have unfurled the curtains. The fan of the rain sways. Intoxicating wine from the skies flows into the goblet of the pond. Today, deep within our hearts something longs to take root and blossom. How much happiness will be needed to nurture it? Mala, let us gather that happiness today. Then we will immerse ourselves, and watch the manifestation of divinity. But Mala, do not shut your eyes today, do not dive into slumber and be lost.”)

A station, rasping noise of the tracks, fast appearing and disappearing lines of a few flickering lamps, and then again darkness, again the same rhythms of speed. But now Mala does not want to close her eyes. She wants to wake Ashok and chat with him. Ashok was a mine of jokes from the *Readers' Digest*. He can also play antakshari¹. He gets down at some unknown station and as the train is about to start, puts a cup of hot tea in Mala's hand. And then the chatter. While listening Mala slips far away. But how far? So far that one cannot recall the way back? But a woman does not get lost like this. What answer will the desolate, lonely house give if someone knocks on the door at midnight? Therefore, the woman returns. She opens the door — often there is no one outside. It was only the illusion of a sound. The blowing of winds. The throbbing of nothingness. She has to shut the door.

It was just before morning. Dawn was breaking in the east. Mala's eyes were burning, unable to tolerate even the soft light of the morning. But during the day she cannot possibly sit with her eyes shut. Suddenly she is irritated. She thinks, “I will get down at the first station and walk as far as my legs will carry me, and then decide what is to be done. At the moment I don't want to see the faces of Lila, Ashok, Arun, Amal, don't want to hear their voices; now I want solitude,

an unknown land, unfamiliar people — I will cultivate a new identity with Ajay's help, we will make a new beginning."

Even as she thinks, Ashok tells her, "Come, the train is nearing a station. Let's loosen up on the platform." She gets up. Wheeler's bookstall, a tea stall, sleepy children, bedding, the singing of birds — Mala walked with her hand in Ashok's, Ashok did not speak, ("Mala, I saw you yesterday. You were with Ashok. I thought of calling out to you. Then I thought that perhaps you would not like it. But didn't you see me? You walked as if you were hiding behind Ashok. I was curious: what were you talking about? But I am not spying, I like to watch you, I like to hear you speak.") Mala was irritated. She wanted to be alone on some pretext, but Ashok did not let go of her hand. Ultimately, helplessly, she walked with him. It was time for the train to leave. Both returned. Lila was watching them from the window. The train started moving. The same routine — she could not bear it any longer. But was Lila able to tolerate it? Why wasn't anyone talking openly? Perhaps this was the reason why silence irritated Ajay. But then speaking must be natural, isn't it? Mala was confused. ("Mala why don't you speak?" "Ajay, I am confused." "Tell me, I would help you sort things out." "Who knows, whether you mightn't create more confusion?") Lila says that those who live wholeheartedly, who are not untrue to their hearts, don't complicate their lives. Mala can't understand all this. A thorn can pick out a thorn, but confusion can not remove confusion. Mala ponders, "I hope I have not unnecessarily created a dread of confusion. What if I had the courage to say, 'no' at the moment that it ought to have been said. What if I had said 'yes' at a moment that required saying so. But this in fact is not easy. The heart betrays one. Wickedly, it does not respond. Meanwhile, the moment passes, but life does not end at that moment!"

Lila approached and sat next to Mala. She didn't speak of Ajay. But still, both knew that thoughts of Ajay flashed through their minds often. Why are relationships so complicated? Is it because we do not give them space to grow, because we confine them? Lila says that what cannot

envelop one's entire life grows to be painful. But life — how much do we know our own lives? And hence there is an adventure, the pursuit of pleasure (or renunciation?). Mala ponders over this point of Lila's. Love demands an offering. But why should it be so? Lila does not like these ifs and buts; she feels that those who live with the constant fear of doing something wrong, of making a mistake, of committing a sin create complications. Does not the fear of sin become sin itself? And doesn't merit make us solitary? Therefore, Lila often says, "Mala, you strive to negate your solitude by surrounding yourself with people. But how pathetic your striving is!" Sometimes Mala forgetting herself becomes one with the environment. How light everything becomes! Pure joy wafts around. But slowly everything starts becoming heavy. Transparency clouds over. Tears fall. The sun has risen. The puddles are copper-coloured. The sparrows catch small worms. The trees have bathed in the rain. The morning sun sparkles on them. Despite this the horizon on the west is blurred. The air is moist.

Mala straining her neck out of the window watches these. Sometimes raindrops caught in the trees fall on Mala's hair. Ashok, with his eyes shut, is lying on the berth. His arm hangs over the side of the berth. Mala watches it. Small stations flash past. Huts in a distance that look like dots, square, rectangular fields, a town in-between, absently Mala watches these. For some reason she does not have the courage to shut her eyes. Ajay used to tell her, "Mala, don't think that an experience is yours alone, learn to receive an experience as if you are absorbing it on behalf of everyone else." But Mala could never negate the "I." If one discarded that, what essence would remain? Surely there must be some flavour in dissolving the "I?"

Mala savoured Ajay's "I." But he was determined to be mad enough to dissolve the "I." Mala could never understand this. What was creativity? Literature? Art? Dissolve all one's happiness, banish the world, then just be a receiver of experiences. But can one just be an observer? If that were so, why would Ajay long for Mala? Nevertheless, Ajay used to say,

Mala our love will not have a roof over its head, it would not have a regular household, our love will always be on the move. Mala used to like this. But whatever Ajay created required complete solitude. He never allowed even a shadow to be cast on his space. Wasn't that a heightened ego? That ego wounded Mala, flung her afar. Perhaps Ajay did not realise this. Lila was different. She found all this so trivial. If love is important, didn't everything else automatically become secondary? Words can be created even together. Such thoughts exhausted Mala. Why is spontaneity so rare? Did Ashok have this spontaneity? He did think aloud. There were no complications here. But Mala's mind was vain. It put forth thousands of objections. It was sullen. It was not easy to appease. Lila knew the climate of the literary world created by Ajay and to that extent, knew Ajay better. But, Mala remained indifferent to that world.

70 ("Mala, do you remember? That day we went to buy sarces. They were beautiful. You were holding them up against yourself to see how they looked on you. How happy I was at your innocent joy! You celebrated my choice and bought sarces. But Mala, I am equally interested in literature. If you had accompanied me to the *Strand* and said, 'Shall we buy this? Do you like this very much? We wanted to read this poem, didn't we?' What if, excited and happy you had spoken like this and bought many books and caused my happiness to overflow? But Mala, how distant we were when you stopped to buy printed handkerchiefs and I browsed through secondhand books on the footpath!")

Mala often feels that she has unnecessarily cultivated and nurtured some delusions, and crushed her own heart under them. There was no distance between her and Ajay, yet, why did she hold this delusion of distance close to her heart? Did it have a charm of its own? Was it possible that Ajay had not discerned her weakness, or had he remained silent even after doing so?

Piercing the darkness a car speeds along on the road parallel to the railway track. For a while its headlights are visible, then it turns off somewhere and the red dot of its light

disappears. Mala remembers: similarly once on a dark night (Ajay didn't like moonlit nights) she was travelling with Ajay in a taxi to a deserted sea coast. Churches, narrow lanes and the sea visible in the gaps — Mala was happy, as if she were going to a new land. Ajay was overjoyed. He talked continuously. As if Mala was imbibing his every word. The road ran parallel to the sea coast. In the distance the flowing white mane of the waves and their neighing were creating a different environment. By nature Mala was fearful, but that day it was as if she wanted to break through the shores of being and overflow. The waters had started receding, the waves smashed on the rocks and left patterns of foam on the sand as they ran back. Holding her hands Ajay was slowly leading her into the sea. The cool touch of water intoxicated Mala's heart. Subjected to some overflowing passion she embraced Ajay.

From Ajay's lips, the utterance of her name — she savoured its sweet taste.

("The secret desire of your mind is that my hands should hold yours without inhibition and how true you were in your desire as you succumbed, isn't it? Because how often life gets smothered by unnecessary inhibitions! If we allow one arrested melody to flow, someone sitting next to us, waiting to hear it, joins a sweet sound to it and delights us. What is left undone, never leaves us. Its sad eyes gaze at us. Therefore, I say how fortunate I am! Even before your heart could desire something, I placed it in your hands!")

71

As if they were a large wave, Ajay's arms had contained her in a tight embrace. But the very next moment she had attempted to free herself. Ajay despaired. Mala herself did not understand her feelings. Even today she did not understand what she had gathered between the letters of her name. What does one do, how does one welcome love that can agitate lives to come? Perhaps she had escaped out of fright. Scratching, furrowing with tears the adamantine body of darkness, Mala looked for an answer to this problem. Now a sea roared in her heart. The fierce rhythms of its tides agitated her. She was often startled.

Human beings like outlines. In the blurred lantern light

on the platform some voice and the sounds of the train running — Mala heard them with closed eyes. Once in a while she dozed off. Even in her drowsiness she was not alone, she stumbled on many unfamiliar worlds.

(I want to place you next to dense forests, and watch you. Love can reveal the various forms of a woman. They are strangers even to you. Therefore, when you pout and say, "No, 'we' would not like such a thing," I laugh thinking, what sort of a creature is this "we?" You say with irritation. "If 'someone' wants to laugh, he can laugh, how are 'we' bothered?" When I ask "Who is this 'someone?'" Pulling my ear you say, "Here!" And when I ask "Where is 'we'?" Proudly tapping yourself you say, "Here!" And then this 'someone' and 'we' merged in a kiss, didn't they?)

72 One more morning, one more day, tea, breakfast, newspapers, leafing through the railway time-table, arrival departure, lunch ..., at one station Ashok meets two girls of his acquaintance. They are travelling by the same train. They wanted to spend some time with Ashok. Mala laughed and said, "Go ahead."

Mala noticed neither fatigue nor the redness due to lack of sleep or tears in Lila's eyes. They were full of joy. Lila sat next to Mala. Lila never got into an argument. The fields have been ploughed. The furrowed land met the horizon. A small village somewhere: a cluster of five-six huts, some large trees, a pond with little water, somewhere an old ruin — before the eyes can take them in, the train moves on. A small well, what a world its coolness creates around it! Lila observes these with curiosity. Describes the scene to Mala. Small children in the village curiously wave at the passing train. Lila looked at this world with the same curiosity. Mala wondered whether Lila wasn't cruel in her own way? She wants to shatter Lila's joy to pieces. But she cannot understand why she finds these things so unbearable now. Lila has bought a bunch of flowers from the railway station. Its fragrance spreads.

("There is a narrow lane here. Both sides are lined with siris. I walk that lane every evening, I love the fragrance of the green siris flowers. How shall I describe it? During the

time of your B.A. examinations, worn out by exertion and the scorching afternoon you rested your head on my shoulder and as your fatigue eased, your face flushed with joy, my cheek was warmed by your breath — the fragrance of that breath and of this siris have become one.”)

The flowers look sad, pitiable. In a while their heads will droop, the wind would scatter their petals. But Lila, looking at those flowers has blossomed like one.

Mala couldn't bear the daylight. Her eyes couldn't take the glare. If it were possible, she would have dived into the depth of slumber. But there are no longer burdens that can drag her to the bottom. In a short time she floated up. Lila has Ajay's scrapbook. In it, there is a childhood photograph of his, faded and yellowed. There is a black stone house in the background, and two other children of his age were with him. He wore an embroidered cap and a bracelet and sat very gravely, but was tense as if he was about to leap up and run away. His fingers were still not marked by writing and re-writing the alphabet. What must he be looking at with large unblinking eyes! Mala's lips trembled. She wanted to kiss those eyes. Ajay had asked for her childhood photograph but she had not given it to him. What was there to see in it. Today it makes her laugh. Ajay is drawn to the sullen girl of Mala's childhood. He wants to know Mala from the very beginning.

73

(“Mala today is my birthday. What if instead, from today the years of your life and mine were to flow together like the meeting of two rivers? What sweet melodies would fill the arbours of pleasure gardens created on the full, fertile banks of the river of time!”)

The pages of the scrap book flutter in the air. The scrap book rests in Mala's lap. It is weightless — yet how many years of a life it held! And those years! Mala was suddenly breathless and felt as if, upon surfacing after a deep dive, she'd found that some one had placed a transparent plastic lid on the waters and that there was no way out but to die. She raised the glass shutter. The dust layered her face. The wind wrapped itself around her like some unknown ghost. She shivered.

Ashok announced that in a few hours the journey would

come to an end. Lila started to collect their belongings. Mala got up to wash her face. For a moment, she stared at her own reflection and laughed. The mysteries that Ajay wanted to fathom, did they truly lie in her eyes? Men impose mysteries on women and then voluntarily plunge to death in the unfathomable depths of those mysteries! But perhaps this was not wholly true. Did Mala even know herself? Therefore, what was needed was intense love. Love, the roaring waves of which could unite everything, even these proud rocks. But driven by some unknown fear Mala had been running away from the power of this intensity.

("Mala, sometimes I feel like giving you a new name. Shall I call you by the name of a tide? No, I don't like tides at all. I like a small quiet lake, its transparent heart — it is not without its mysteries though — quiet ripples, a lotus glade.")

Isn't death itself like a high tide crashing? Mala continued to stare at her reflection, trying to make her face as unfamiliar as possible. She felt that perhaps it was not very difficult to be a stranger to oneself. But slowly the unfamiliar grows
74 familiar, one desires it, and the nature of desire is to cling...

To wash her face, Mala wiped the kanku from her forehead. ("Wait, you're very impatient!" "Why, should I admire you from a distance?" "No, you don't understand anything. The kanku leaves a mark on your clothes. What if it tells tales?") From under a lock of hair a mole appeared. Every time he met Mala, Ajay used to look for the mole, as if the mole was going to disappear and with that their love. Mala used to laugh at his childishness. Ajay was childlike. Whenever Mala was angry, to mollify her he used to conjure up fairy tales and narrate them to her. Even Mala listened like a little girl. Such moments were moments of pure happiness, not a shadow of sorrow cast over them. But who knew, what would happen later!

Ashok and Lila collected their belongings. The train wouldn't stop at the station for long. It's a small town, perhaps can't even be called a town. It was about to be dusk. The sky was once again overcast. The land was covered with trees. A river ran past. Not a hill anywhere. The train turned,

changing its path. Mala looked at the engine with curiosity. Her heart fluttered with some unknown fear.

("It's a small station. Every evening I go to the station for a stroll. There are five lanterns on the platform. There are three oak trees. There are two neem trees as well. I loiter on the station. Two trains halt here in the evening. I indulge in a childish fantasy, that you will step out of one of them. The fatigue of travel shows on your face, but that did not make your face less beautiful. I take the bag away from your hand. All that you can do is to protest. We sat for a while on the bench under the oak tree. I gathered some flowers and gave them to you. Then we went out. Apart from three or four taxis and four or five horse-carriages, there are no other vehicles. I love walking. Since you were tired we took a horse-carriage. I acquainted you with the surroundings. This is the shop which I described in that story. The distant sea fills you with joy. 'Shall we bathe there tomorrow?' I say, 'Why tomorrow? We shall tonight,' your happiness is limitless ... Mala, I bring you thus everyday and you slip away. But if at all you come someday, it's a small station. There are oak and neem trees. There are taxis and horse-carriages outside. The house is not far. The sea is not far. Only we are far apart...")

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The train came to a stop. Mala's eyes scanned the platform. An outline of a form — she stopped suddenly. She counted the oak trees. There were neem trees as well. She felt like sitting on the bench under the oak tree, but it had rained a while ago and everything was wet. There were small puddles. Absentmindedly she splashed her way into a puddle. She felt bitter. She looked for the signs of the sea in the hazy environment. She could not see anything. They came out. The noises from the hotel radios irritated Mala. Why was she sad, embittered here? She saw that the train was still there for some reason. She felt like escaping with the train. The wind shook the trees and some raindrops fell on her. She was startled. Perhaps it was time for the tides. A gust of wind chilled her to the bone. As if someone had asked her to wait, she stopped. Ashok grew impatient. He caught her shoulders, shook her and practically dragged her into the taxi. Ashok did

not like this place at all. Dirty lanes, noisy hotels. He was irritated. An unrecognisable element permeated the atmosphere. The winds touched by the seas have a different quality. It's touch drags one far away from the familiar. Ajay wanted this — to be dragged afar, to drown in strong currents; and yet he longed for home, the dear ones he had left behind. Every letter of his stood witness to this.

("The blue of this sky, the brown of this sea, and the drunkenness of the wind — what is this disquiet that they bring to my heart! As I sit alone, arranging words, a drunken breeze roars between two words. Afraid, I look for a hand to hold. But there is none. But that is good, as I also need this unknown fear and the disquiet.")

76 Making its way through the lanes, the taxi finally stopped. Nearby stood a street light. By it was a ladder against the wall placed upright. There were three or four people standing around. Their features were indistinct. Ashok asked around. Mala didn't want to hear anything. She wanted to escape. Surrounded by houses, it was not easy to catch the signals of the sea, but still she tried, by doing which she wanted to occupy her mind. Lila climbed up the ladder, opened the doors, the windows. A window, right above Mala's head opened ("This window is blind. What if I fix your eyes here in place of the window?") and Lila shouted, "Mala, come up," Mala could not move for a while. A girl of fifteen or sixteen years came up to Mala and stared. Perhaps she wanted to say something. But burdened by some sorrow she could not speak. For some reason Mala felt that they were bound by the same thread of sorrow. This agitated her. As if she were breaking this thread, she rushed up the stairs. The girl followed her. Mala heard her steps. Why was she following her? Fear gripped Mala. She shouted, "Ashok! Ashok!" The empty room echoed and with that rushed out so many voices! The strength seemed to ebb out of Mala. She collapsed on the bed. She was ashamed that something like this had happened. She was constantly alert that no such thing should happen, but ...

Lila groped for the switch in the dark room. Mala also moved her hands along the wall and she found the switch.

She switched on the light. Everything was well arranged. That girl knew this room. Perhaps she had arranged things here. Mala felt like opening the books. Ajay kept letters in books. What if an unposted letter were to fall out... but she sat on the bed. Slowly she familiarised herself with the room. There were no images on the wall, only a calendar fluttered. There was a pile of unanswered mail. Mala leafed through the writing pad. There was an incomplete letter in it. Without any curiosity Mala started reading it; "...I very much want to accept your invitation, and I do like the flattering words that you have used but this brings other memories. Perhaps I am unable to forget as much as I should. You had invited some well-known literary figures for a meal. And how that well-known story writer turned me into a joke! I was silent. But I can't bear the cunning civility and weighty dignity of the famous. I stir false melancholy, my world revolves around three or four things. I am fake, my writing was phony. I am curt, I am arrogant, someone blessed me, *read for a lifetime, write in the next*. How am I concerned with all this? I am not so foolish as to be perturbed by the praise of the stupid or the insults of the jealous. I am ashamed to be associated with the jealous. A writer needs solitude..." Mala was surprised. Ajay never got agitated in this manner. It was not as if he did not care for fame, but he did not value it much either. While narrating the incident, when some university students, had in jest shouted, "There goes a big writer" and encircled him, he had said, "A writer for them is a strange creature. They look for his tail or horns. They forget that I am also a human being like them." Mala remembered: Ajay's new book had just been published. He gave her a copy. For some reason Mala had forgotten to take it with her. The next day, in Mala's presence Ajay had torn that book to pieces. And this made Mala nervous. What would this man do to his own life? How could he be controlled, prevented, diverted? But Lila's view was different. It is true that one should not cast a shadow on the solitude of a writer, but what if one becomes the vision of his eyes, the flow of his blood — can't a woman do this? Lila had once told Mala, "Mala, the love which does not cross

any limits is not love. You are not married. Your heart can accept Ajay, but even if you were married, you would have been forced to commit the sin of accepting his love. Even in sin, love can be pure. But only those who have recognised the truth of love can be so brazen." But Mala had not to this day been able to understand why love was so difficult.

Mala picked up a book. Ajay had some strange habits. Often he used to hide an incomplete story, or a few lines of a poem in a book. He never showed his writing to anyone before it was complete. To irritate him, Mala always leafed through his books, "Why? Are you hiding a love letter to someone?" Ajay used to reply in irritation, "Yes, perhaps." Mala would laugh and reply, "Why perhaps? Don't you know? Who is she, tell me?" Even Ajay would laugh then and say, "I do not know how to describe her. Still, let me try: two crafty eyes, never still, two naughty hands — always upto mischief—" Stopping him mid sentence Mala would continue, "Very playful, will make you dance to her tunes, her touch — intoxicating, her eyes moist with the waters of immortality—" Ajay used to say: "Mala as I tell you so often; why don't you write?" Mala, used to say in anger, "No, I don't want to ruin my life. Even if I write, people would say, it resonates with Ajay's words! And to play with emotions—" Mala remembered all that. For a while she sat absentmindedly with the book. She started leafing through the book. A chit fell out of it. She started reading it,

I cannot rid my room of silences, silence/ is your voice. And do you seek me here?/ I am not here. And you, not finding me,/must ask other places where I was./For not by signs and tokens but by all/that I remember will you know me." Mala felt as was someone was repeatedly whispering these words in her ears. She read on with brimming eyes: "The thought of you returns/ like darkness I have waited, I have not/forgotten. In these shadows I am. safe/though weaponless, defying recognition,/prudent, careful of disguise./For I am no one, I am what I seem./The stillness listens, waiting for my words,/but when I speak my voice is not my own." Mala was frightened. She did not want to listen, but those words reverberated through her ears: "You move,/my love, in a unchang-

ing climate/of the mind, a place I have not seen. And you resist all change, refusing me,/refusing to resist the momentary/lovers you imagine. Filled with tears/my love, you yield to absence. I will not return.

For sometime Mala felt numb. She closed her eyes: a roaring sea, moonlight, white sand on the beach, and a black rider astride a white galloping horse. She heard the galloping of the horse. She could not bear it. She opened her eyes. A black cat stared at her through the window. It's fiery eyes startled Mala. She wanted to escape and yet something bound her to this place.

("Mala, this white lace curtain, this table, this watch — how familiar they are during the day! But at night some demonic power possesses these innocent, harmless objects and I die of fright. I feel as if someone is whispering into my ears. I can't see the visage of that voice, but that voice has honesty, humility and it pleads. I open my eyes. There was no one in the room. Far away a tap drips. But suddenly I hear someone sobbing. I lie still in my bed. The wind or something else knocks on the glass window, branches sway in the breeze. And despite knowing that these shadows are of the tree, I tremble. The curtain flutters in the wind. I see white feet beneath them. Someone is approaching me stealthily. Suddenly that form becomes one with the moonlight. Sometimes I hear incoherent words in my ears. I see reflections of a form in the mirror. Some divine fragrance fills the room. I slip into slumber. As if my body is dissolving in some watery medium. I am unable to do anything. Yet another form enters through the window. Both forms walk hand in hand. Their laughter reverberates. I try to speak, but in that laughter I cannot hear my own words. And I feel, I am false, I am an illusion, only these forms are true. Mala who was that? Was it you? Who was with you? ...")

The world before Mala's eyes disappears. A blurred moonlight was enveloping her. A pat of breeze awakened her. She watched brownness expand before her eyes. She felt as if she were merging into it. But that was a momentary illusion. She heard the clock chime. Ashok came to her side. His hands

encircled Mala. From her cheeks to her breasts, to her navel and below... Ashok's hot breath burnt Mala's lips, she did not move, her hands lay lifeless, there were no tears in her eyes. She stared into the distance. She did not have to wait for anyone, but what else could she do but stare into the distance? Ashok's body entered hers. She was aware of this, but she watched all this as if from outside herself, away from her name, away in an untouched world of her own. Ashok blocked her vision, his hot body encircled hers. A light breeze knocked on the window, its sounds echoed. Slowly the sound took form. Straining her ears Mala heard, "My love, you yield to absences. I will not return."

FIVE

1. kirtinasha the one who destroys glory.

SIX

1. cowries shells; refers here to a game played with them.
2. moksha emancipation, liberation, release from worldly existence, final or eternal emancipation.

EIGHTEEN

1. Ba mother.

NINETEEN

1. Vaidarbhi another name for Damayanti, wife of Nala.
2. Karkotak a serpent in the *Mahabharata*.

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TWENTY

1. shehnai a wind instrument.

TWENTY-THREE

1. veni a floral ornament that women braid into their hair.

TWENTY-FIVE

1. saubhagya
tilak : an auspicious mark applied on the forehead.
2. mangalsutra : sacred symbol of marriage worn around the neck as an ornament by women.

TWENTY-SIX

1. tapas religious austerity, bodily mortification, penance, severe meditation.
2. maya illusion/illusory nature of realities.
3. mantra speech, sacred text, a prayer or song of praise, sacred formula addressed to any individual deity/a mystical verse or magical formula, spell incantation to acquire super human powers.

TWENTY-EIGHT

1. golden deer : reference is to a narrative in *Ramayana*. Sita desired a golden deer — which in fact was asura Mareecha — which Rama and later Lakshman pursued. This led to her abduction by Ravana. Symbolically, it suggests that desire of illusory reality leads to sorrow and suffering.

THIRTY-FIVE

1. tulsi sacred basil.

THIRTY-SEVEN

1. Dadhichi refers to a puranic sage who offered himself to death so that Indra might slay Vratasur (a demon) with the vajra (thunderbolt) fabricated out of his bones.

THIRTY-EIGHT

1. pativrata a devoted, faithful and loyal wife, a chaste and virtuous wife.

FORTY

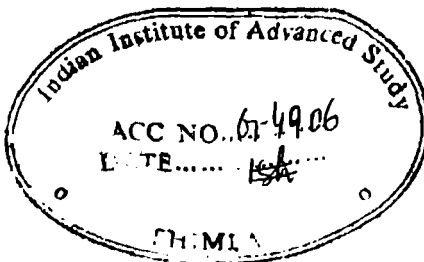
1. Sita also called Vaidehi (or Janaki) she is the wife of Lord Rama in *Ramayana* and daughter of Janaka, king of Mithila. Legend has it that King Janaka found her while he was ploughing a field — as part of the rituals observed during the sowing season.
2. Damayanti : (puranic) wife of Nala, daughter of Bhima, king of Vidarbha.

EPILOGUE

1. antakshari a game of verses.

TITLES IN THIS SERIES

- Bengali* : Woodworm
Subarnalata
- Gujarati* : Henceforth
Rear Verandah
Crumpled Letter
- Hindi* : The Song of the Loom
Unarmed
- Kannada* : Bharathipura
Gendethimma
- Malayalam* : Outcaste
Pandavapuram
Second Turn
Eye of God
- Marathi* : Cocoon
- Oriya* : The Survivor
Face of the Morning
- Punjabi* : Night of the Half Moon
Gone are the Rivers
- Tamil* : Lamps in the Whirlpool
Yamini
Generations
Vasaveswaram
- Telugu* : Puppets
He Conquered the Jungle



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