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BURHI AAIR XAADHU

—

My mother is the solar system

So my grandmother threatened to kill
herself with a penknife. Embarrassed
she ran out; her hands flailing, trying
to stave off the mist. The stillness
of the night plucked my ribs
while my toes scratched for the ground.

I'm a comet! Her voice followed her feet
as she staggered around the garden
in a drunken orbit. Her cat went prancing
after fireflies, crickets, rats—time settled
uncomfortably in our eyes.

Hmm! my mother muttered
as her ears burned and her face turned red.
We were hurtling towards the end of the Universe.

The earliest memory I can recall is from when I was just under two years old. My parents had left me with Aita (my grandma) when they'd gone on a vacation to spend time together. Aita used to stay in a two-bedroom apartment in the heart of Nagaon, a densely populated town east of Guwahati. The apartment was on the first floor, with a balcony that looked out onto a busy road—leading in one direction towards the town centre; in the other to a slum. The branches of a massive tree leaned their way into the balcony, shielding us from the view of the road.

I recall waking up from an afternoon siesta one day and dragging my half-awake body to the balcony. I plastered my face against the cold guard rail and sat there staring at the people walking by. I could hear the voices of women emerging from Aita's room, but my curiosity was piqued by the sight of ripe pea pods dangling from the branches of the tree. When Aita eventually came by, she found pea pods scattered across the floor while I munched nonchalantly. She broke down in laughter, bringing Dangor Aita (her sister) to the balcony who chimed in too.

Now, nobody corroborates this memory. Despite repeated inquiries at different points in my life, I have been consistently met with appreciation for my imagination. 'You always had an active imagination. Once during Durga Puja, you witnessed a twelve-foot idol of Mahisasur and created a scene saying "the scary grandfather" was coming after you,' Aita exclaimed when I asked her about the episode. 'It wasn't more than six feet,' Maa chimed in, then adding, 'I still find it funny that you chose to refer to Mahisasur as the scary grandfather.' The only grounded image is that of the tree whose existence was affirmed by everyone in Maa's family. However, the branches never leaned into the balcony but away from it; and peas never grew on trees. Nonetheless, whenever I eat peas I am briefly transported to that afternoon in the balcony. In a sense, this is in the image of the Proustian episode of the madeleine, except my involuntary memory segues into probable fantasy.

There are multiple entryways to Aita's life story. To embark on this journey is akin to rowing a small boat on the waters of the Mnemosyne and Lethe (the antagonistic rivers of Memory and Forgetting in Greek legend). However, the two legendary rivers are not distinct channels but one, which renders the surrounding landscape as simultaneously real and unreal.

To illustrate my point, let me narrate an anecdote. In early 2000, Aita decided to shift to a semi-rural locality across the NH-37 in Guwahati. She, jointly with Dangor Aita, had bought a piece of land there. When she set up a thatched house—her savings didn't allow for the construction of a concrete house—it was the only one within a radius of 500 metres. To the north lay sprawling paddy fields, which were tilled by farm labourers from the Bengali Muslim community that lived in the west. A faint muddy track cut across the grassy plain and went east towards the Bengali Hindu settlement. A couple of metres south of the house, the tranquil waters of Basistha flowed past; on the other bank was the incomplete construction of Ila Trust, a charitable hospital set up by a distant relative of Maharani Gayatri Devi, and a solitary hut inhabited by a Bengali Hindu family of four. Every year, the monsoon would result in the entire landscape being submerged under water; the hut resembled a tiny island desperately trying to stay afloat. I'd experienced one such flood in the summer of 2003, when Aita and I had been stranded for three days. With nothing much to do, we'd spent most of our time staring at water snakes and fish passing by our feet, sometimes listening to the radio or playing Ludo—the electricity had been out for a while. What was an inconvenience, and in extreme cases, a tragedy for the people around, was instead poetic for my urban imagination. But what I had not experienced was the flash flood that occurred in the autumn of 2004. Aita had woken up to the sight of a dense, black mass of snakes swirling atop the mosquito net. They were trying to escape the water that reached the bed—it was waist-high. For half an hour, Aita and my younger uncle screamed for help, until the man who lived on the other bank arrived on a country

boat. The immensity of these images struck my adolescent mind with such vigour that I found myself lost in them. I wrote poems and stories, and narrated them to friends. With each retelling, I re-imagined the incident from my perspective. This resulted in two things: one, I now intermittently have dreams of waking up to find myself alone on a bed with snakes swirling atop the mosquito net, and water all around; two, Aita and Uncle recall my presence on that day.

Two concurrent ideas emerge from the anecdote: the concept of postmemory and the fragility of memory. The term postmemory was coined by Marianne Hirsch in her research on post-Holocaust memory. She defines it as 'the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they "remember" only through the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up' (Hirsch, 1997, p. 22).

As a relatively new concept—first introduced in 1990 in her essay on Art Spiegelman's Maus—its definition and scope remain fluid. However, what is clear is that postmemory is not mediated by simple recall or recapitulation of details, but by "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch, 1997, p. 22). This raises a critical challenge: the risk that the generation after may appropriate past traumas as their own in the act of retelling. It is a delicate line, one I have navigated in my re-imagination of the flood.

I ran after goats
throughout that summer
when it rained snakes.

I woke up that day
and my grandmother
was bargaining for light
with a comb
Gently caressing

the mosquito net
and the blacks squirmed.

Dozens fell off
swimming
around the island of
Our bed.

We were alone, caught
in an 18th-century novel.
But this is the 21st century.

The roosters are clawing on the tin roof
announcing the pregnancies of goats
while my mother is out carrying the city.

She was born in the Year of the Snake.

'She is here. We are safe.'

My grandmother wept.

There is no God, but radio
and we tuned in to
the broken frequencies of
Voice of America…

Because one always ends up in America
although they imagined India.

Facts: Aita managed a small farm with cows, goats, sheep, hens, and ducks, their numbers shifting over the years. I was especially fond of a black goat she had bought in my name—a companion for eight years before it was eventually sold.

Maa, as it turned out, was indeed born in the Year of the Snake, according to the Chinese zodiac. Aita, with her deep interest in

astrology, often recalled an image of herself combing snakes off the mosquito net—a vivid performance woven into many of her recollections.

She also owned a radio capable of tuning into shortwave frequencies—this was before FM channels had emerged, and we would sometimes listen to broadcasts from VoA, BBC, and others.

Corollary: One of my favourite words is *saudade*, a Portuguese term with no direct English translation. It signifies a profound sense of nostalgia or melancholia, arising from the loss of someone or something once deeply loved. Hidden within its depths is the unsettling awareness that the source of this longing may never have truly existed. It is often considered characteristic of the Brazilian temperament, where the former colonists feel an enduring yearning for the 'home' they left behind.

The closest English equivalent is *desiderium*, a word whose etymological roots trace back to the Latin *desiderare*, meaning 'to long for, to have a great desire' (Wikipedia, 2025). One could argue that the British empirical tradition fostered a realist predisposition—one inherently resistant to such poetic expressions. But I digress.

LOST IN THE MALL

Elizabeth Loftus is a cognitive psychologist and a leading expert on human memory, known for her pioneering research on false memories since the 1970s. One of the most well-known studies she co-conducted was the *Lost in the Mall* experiment (Loftus & Pickrell, 1995). In this study, participants were provided with four stories about their childhood, three of which were true—supplied by family members—and one that was entirely fabricated: an instance of being lost in a shopping mall at around the age of five. Over multiple interviews, participants were asked to recall details of these

events. While the majority correctly remembered the real events, approximately **25% of participants** falsely recalled being lost in the mall, often embellishing the memory with additional sensory details and emotions. However, not all participants accepted the false event, highlighting both the malleability and the limits of human memory (Loftus & Pickrell, 1995).

Loftus concluded that memory is highly malleable, with each act of recollection being a reconstruction influenced by perception, sensation, and abstraction. This suggested that false memories could be as vivid and emotionally compelling as real ones, making them difficult to distinguish (Loftus, 1997). However, critics of her work raised an important counterpoint: what if the family members who corroborated the initial childhood events had faulty memories themselves? If so, the participants' recollections of being lost in the mall might have been genuine. This raises a fundamental epistemological question—on what basis do we privilege one set of memories over another?

This leads us to move around in circles. Let me narrate another anecdote: television first entered my maternal household in 1985. As was the case for most families who owned a TV back then, the drawing room would make way for a congregation every Sunday. Neighbours would gather to watch *Chitrahaar*, a feature film, or the daily news bulletin. Gradually everyone bought a set of their own, and the congregation made way for family time. It was during this Sunday ritual that my grandfather developed a soft corner for the young Shahrukh Khan. Both Maa and Aita talk at length about how my grandfather religiously watched *Fauji*, and later *Circus*. 'This young man is quite good!' he would iterate with a nod, his chin resting on his palms. However, my grandfather died on 19 September 1986, and the first episode of *Fauji* aired on 18 January 1989. *Circus*, too, aired later that year. Initially, I quietly insisted that it must have been someone other than Shahrukh, but upon experiencing their unrelenting position on this recollection I produced the facts. 'But you claim that one shouldn't believe everything on the internet!' Maa retorted with a

smirk. 'Would you believe the experiences of your Maa and Aita, or some random information you found on the internet?' she pressed. Touché!

THE CASE OF LURIA'S S

For thirty years, beginning in 1920, neuropsychologist Alexander Luria (Quiroga, 2017) studied a man named Solomon Shereshevsky (known as Luria's S) for his exceptional memory. Luria conducted multiple studies and experiments, and found that Solomon had five-fold synaesthesia, in which the stimulation of one of his senses produced a reaction in every other. This condition led to a hyperactive imagination, which further helped him in memorising details with such precision that it astounded everyone. He did complain that his condition produced unnecessary and distracting images or feelings. For instance, he had a hard time remembering faces because he saw them as 'very changeable' or memorising information whose intended meaning differed from its literal one. Eventually, Luria concluded that he had failed to measure the true capacity of Solomon's ability, which was remarkable for a leading neuropsychologist of his time to state.

Parallelly, and most probably in ignorance of Luria's research, Jorge Luis Borges published the story 'Funes the Memorius' in the Argentine daily *La Nación* in June 1942. Luria's case study *The Mind of a Mnemonist* would not be published until 1968. Borges' fantastical short story follows the titular character, Funes, who is the double of Solomon—both displaying a prodigious talent for memorising detail. With academic precision Borges had concluded, among other things, that Funes' condition prevented his mind from making generalisations (or detail-suppression), which resulted in his inability to form abstract thoughts. 'To think is to forget a difference, to generalise, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes, there were nothing but details,' as Borges writes in the story (1942).

My Mother's Garden

My mother complains of body aches and stiffness
as she stoops to straighten the branches of the shrubs.

She can't sit straight
her tailbone juts out
but the roses have never had to lean
on the weight of the succulents, and
she distributes eggshells
neatly, proportionately, across the vases
like a cat prancing across the solar system
rearranging the planets, the moons, and the memories of dinosaurs.

I need more Vitamins and meaning in my bones, she says
while feeling the memory of the taste of elephant apples.

HALL OF MIRRORS

Probably the most significant emotional event in Aita's life was the death of my grandfather. He had suffered from pancreatic cancer for two years, misdiagnosed with acute gastritis. By the time the doctors got it right, it was too late—he was gone within a month. Ironically, at the time, everyone thought it was Aita who was on her deathbed.

On the day my grandfather returned from Dibrugarh with Maa—where he was finally diagnosed and advised to leave for Chennai immediately—Aita was in a hospital in Guwahati, undergoing surgery to remove a tumor from her uterus. Neither knew about the other's condition. The family had decided to keep them in the dark.

'Did you know your mother was being operated on today?' my grandfather asked Maa when they arrived at the hospital. She watched as her nod traveled across his creased face and dissolved into his tired

eyes. Tears streamed down her cheeks. I turned off the camera, letting her sit with the memory without intrusion.

When he returned from Chennai, death had already lodged itself in him. The final month was excruciating—conversations unraveled into fragmented words, then into syllables, until only small gestures remained. Then, on the night of September 18, the crisp autumn air was shattered by his desperate gasps for breath.

Aita grew up in a foster home with five older siblings. Her adoptive parents, kind-hearted Baptists, had left their teaching jobs to run a missionary bookstore in Pan Bazaar, Guwahati. Though she had always known she was adopted, she never felt the need to question her origins—her father's unwavering affection made her feel secure.

When he passed away in her early teens, she and her mother had no choice but to move in with her married sister in Shillong. Life there felt different. Her father had once shielded her from household chores, but in Shillong, she felt an unspoken obligation to contribute.

She met my grandfather, a friend of her brother, while studying in Barapani, Meghalaya. At the time, he was working in the fisheries department of the state government. They soon fell in love, but their union faced stiff opposition from both families—he was a Brahmin, she a Christian. In an attempt to dissuade him from going through with the marriage, her mother and elder sister fabricated a story, claiming they had found her as an abandoned baby in a hospital.

However, his friend—her brother—directed him to Dr. Alice Grace Mark at Satribari Christian Hospital in Guwahati.

Dr. Alice, as everyone in my family now refers to her, was one of the first two indigenous women doctors in the hospital's history. The hospital itself had been established to reach out to rural women who did not consent to be treated by men. As part of her duties, she was sent to the border to aid refugees evacuating Burma during the Japanese invasion in the Second World War. It is unclear whether the hospice where she served was affiliated with the hospital or some other body—this account comes from Aita and her elder sister, both relying on memories passed down over time.

During her service at the hospice, a Bengali Brahmin man with roots in Bangladesh arrived with his two young daughters–my grandmother and grand-aunt. Over the next few days, he became acquainted with Dr. Alice. Eventually, he entrusted her with the care of his daughters while he went back in search of their mother, who had been lost along the way in the 'long march,' one of modern history's shadow events. A couple of months later, Dr. Alice moved back to Guwahati with the two young girls—she adopted the elder one, while a local family took in the younger. Their father did not return until almost a decade later, worn down by years of searching for both his wife and daughters. When he finally found Dr. Alice, she feigned ignorance of the episode; defeated, he turned back, having lost everyone.

When my grandfather found Dr. Alice, she was in her late fifties and burdened by Christian guilt. In an attempt at redemption, she poured her remorse into their conversation. My grandfather then sought out Dangor Aita, who was working as a nurse in a dispensary in Nalbari at the time. Together, they returned to Shillong to meet Aita, weaving a new fabric of meaning and belonging. Later that year, they were married.

The death of my grandfather was not just the loss of a loved one; it was also the unraveling of my grandmother's beginnings, the slow wearing out of that fabric.

Rodrigo Quian Quiroga, an ICREA lecturer and Head of the Perception and Memory Laboratory at the Hospital del Mar Research Institute in Barcelona, sums up his chapter on perception (specifically his analysis of Hermann von Helmholtz's similar research) thus (Quiroga, 2017):

> We possess only a minimal fraction of the information that passes through our eyes, the fraction we care about. We use this information to extract signs, and we create concepts and form internal representations that are the basis of our thought; we then form memories and keep only those that are relevant, draining the rest into Lethe, directly into the realm of oblivion.

Borges might have called the memories that drift with us on the Mnemosyne our ghosts—splitting, multiplying, and endlessly returning. (Borges, 1986) For thirty-six years, since the death of my grandfather, the memory of a sense of belonging has returned in multiple doubles, each trying to weave back into the fabric. My mother's *conflated* memory of him appreciating Shahrukh Khan is one of the threads—a ghost returning. Like echoes shifting in tone with each repetition, these doubles do not return as they were but as altered reflections, layering over the past.

History and Memory

I couldn't write a word for a month
or two, maybe some—
I stood there at the window of our
living room, scowling
at the church across the street
a two-storied house with Dish TV
antennae connecting us
to our Father in heaven, indifferent.

Aren't we all alone? I asked
this day, like other days, an infinite
number of other days
coming back to me with
a cigarette on its lips, and
Cirrus clouds in its eyes.

I remember talking to the orphaned
cat last night, born in the gutter,
and the angry pomeranian that
barks at everything that moves,
standing by the window, and
scowling at the church across the street.

Maybe he sees god.

When I was a child they made us
kneel in front of an encased
statue of the son, his eyes weighed
down by the shadow of his father
who impaled the linings of his
mother's womb on some godforsaken
miserable night
and I would stare straight at the telephone
at the far end of the room, willing it to ring.

Of my mother's voice that I carry in my ears
and my father's indifference in my genes.

Aren't we all alone? I asked
Bark bark bark bark
Bark bark bark bark
I tried writing a sonnet, this day
This O'Hara day, fat with an apple
in its mouth.

abab cdcd efef gg
First quatrain for history, second for tragedy
and third for farce.
Meow meow.

But I can recite the epic poetry
that flows through my grandmother's hair,
by heart—of a war, of abandoned children, of the
lonely soldier witnessing the destruction of the
Bridge on the River Kwai and exclaiming
'This is madness, madness!', of love
that comes to you once and never again.

Aren't we all alone? I asked
But she's hard of hearing, instead looks
straight into the eyes of the hills
that refused to cry when her lover died.
Aren't we all alone? I asked
Aren't we all alone? I ask

Saudade.

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