

Foreign Bodies

Contents

Women's work	1
Equal opportunity in Delhi	4
Unremarkable	7
A reason to go to Kanpur	9
Parvati picks her battles	10
Who am I to say?	11
Peers	13
Second skin	15
Animal facts	17
The Argument	19
Monkeys in the memory palace	21

Women's work

Debbie, the office manager
tells me they built the Taj Mahal
without real mortar,
only marble blocks
and large vats of dahl,
to stick it together.
Trust me, she says, it's true.

This is just before Debbie
begins instructing me
in how to tie a sari.
First, once around the waist
and tuck.
Leave it, she commands me.
Gather up the other end,
fix the length of the pallu
behind you.

Later, I learn
the pallu displays
your sensibility as a woman,
how gracefully it trails you
pleated or loose,
how close to the ground.
But the first time,
Debbie does it for me,
looks me up
and down,
judges where to pin it
at the shoulder.

This is the secret, she says,
your control panel—
the fixed point at the shoulder
starts the diagonal line
across your breast
wraps around
leaving open the window
to your lower back,
left side, then belly,
curving path
to your power,

the falling pleats
an ancient symbol of fertility.

Secure the sari at your left hip,
a small tuck,
as a place holder. This,
she says, opening
the wide circle of fabric
between us—this
is how you know
what you have to work with.

How many widths of palm
can you get
out of the remaining length?
She pleats my skirt
between her pointer and thumb,
until her hand is flat
against me, pulls out
the waist of my petticoat,
so we can both see my feet
then flips the folds,
thick like the ticket book
of a traffic cop,
tucking the whole thing
under my wide-eyed navel.

She has me walk
in front of her.
Do you feel secure?
The tops of your shoes
should fan open the pleats
as you step,
just a bit,
the way a peacock teases,
deciding
is it worth opening its tail?

This strange trust placed,
in workplace women
starts by
standing in front of Debbie,
in only a petticoat
and a midriff bearing top,

learning something so basic
as how to get dressed
to attend a meeting.

And the next time?
Can I trust
in the large pin
I fix at my own shoulder?
Is it enough
to have knowledge
of my power, how I control,
all else simply folded,
one tuck that
keeps it all
from coming undone.

Equal opportunity in Delhi

Mr. Singh, the security guard stands
agitated in the stairwell but doesn't speak his mind.
To me, he only ever says,
Yes. Madame. Taxi. Coming.
He expresses displeasure only with his eyes,
the fall of his large mustache.

This evening, he stands on the landing
behind Ashok who has come
for my weekly personal training session.
If he could,
Mr. Singh would post himself inside my door
to defend me, a foreign lady living alone,
far away from her father's home.

His eyes say, *Madame, do not allow
this nefarious fellow in your abode.
He arrives bearing mischief and ill intention.
He knows not his proper place,*
Mr. Singh's sweeping mustache curls
toward his ears, spells out, *I beseech you.*

Does Mr. Singh feel this way
about letting any man inside my flat?
Or just the type who wears clothes
that mask his caste, arrives with confidence
above his station, addresses me
without acknowledging the vast difference
in amount I get paid
for a day's work compared to him.

Ashok is a young man who comes to me,
highly recommended by my boss
(himself a green card holder returned to India.)
"He'll come to your house for only Rs 300 a session.
Can't pay that for a trainer back in the States."
I agree. So, I put on the shorts I can wear in Delhi
only inside my home, lace on sneakers
that squeak on the marble floors of my flat
and prepare to sweat.

The best part of the session is the end.

I lie on the floor and Ashok makes me explore
my body with my mind. He says, feel the 'shi' in neck,
shlowly, shlowly, spreading down, down arms,
shlowly to elbows, down, down to toes.

He is 'confuse' why I laugh. He doesn't know
the word for fingers is different than the word for toes.
No, no, he says, this is time for relaxshh,
not laugh. Relaaaxshh.shh.shh.
He treats himself as a professional
and out of respect for his belief
I swallow my laugh and obey the command: Relaxshh.

He has already familiarized himself with my body,
noticed the tension points,
the range of my flexibility. That is his job.
The same way he works to gently probe
my other interests as he presses my inner thigh
helps me to stretch wider
and reach for the cold marble tile in front of me.

I wonder which of his clients
he does this regimen with. Only the ladies?
or the gentlemen too? Only expats? or wealthy Indians too?
I wonder what my boss had in his mind
when recommending Ashok to me.
So talented and for only 300 rupees!

I am relaxed but thinking of Mr. Singh,
waiting on the landing outside.
He must be probing the face
of my heavy wooden door, wondering
when would be a reasonable time to knock,
to say the dhobi has delivered the ironing,
or the telcom guy has come to get paid.
That is part of his job, to imagine
what happens to me behind the door.

He doesn't know how much we are the same,
or what's the difference, Ashok from myself.
I know Ashok would not pay me 300 rupees
for the pleasure of stretching out across my cold floors.
I know that once to take a job in Kabul,
I had to secure lodgings for myself,

I probed an expat's interest, pressed against his thigh
and solicited accommodations
in his compound.

It is better that we all just relax.
I want to invite Mr. Singh to come lie on the floor
with us, explore his own body, feel his 'Shi' spreading.
Isn't it all part of the good job we aim to do?
to probe, to worry, be sheltered, to get paid.
What does it matter
to call the fingers the same thing as the toes?

Unremarkable

Once I bought
a cotton white sari
with a green block print border,
for rupees two-fifty.

I wanted to wear that green,
the color of grass
I never saw in India--
cool, sweet, naïve
unbeaten by sun
unimpressed by humidity
untouched by dust.

The cotton--smooth, opaque
Mother Dairy white.
It crumpled softly in my lap
when I sat.
The pleats falling into place
 like a well-heeling dog
when I got up.

I wore that sari to the office
and got lifted brows,
side-eye glances.
Not because I was
the foreign woman wearing sari
but because
I had shown up to work
in a housedress.

This was
a sari for weekends
at home in the summer
worn by old women
who wore sari everyday,
as casual as
making your own curd,
unremarkable as
calling the man who
brings the tea
'Boy.'

At lunch,
The office ladies
looked me up and down
while they offered bites
from their thalis.
I saw them
wrap up their commentary
into their paan,
add a smear of lime,
then tucked the whole
fragrant thing
into their mouths.

It impressed me,
every time,
the way they took it
in one go, as they might
a large goldfish
or a small mammal,
and then
chewed, chewed,
chewed,
sucked its juice,
and then swallowed,
a thin
line
of crimson
left
in the crease
of their mouths.

A reason to go to Kanpur

It's only me and a hijra* dressed in sari with gold borders
on the platform at this time of morning.
We are the only ones with something to prove
about being women in this country.

It is my first travel-by-train-Indian-wedding. Nobody told me,
dress comfortably, pack a bag, All the rooms in the wedding hall
have been rented for guests to freshen up from their ride,
put on party clothes, finish their faces, arrange their hair.

Laxmi and I, both in our Kancheepuram silk
sit stiffly as our pleats, display the tenacity of femininity.
She wears strings of jasmine in her hair to soften her jaw,
decent jewelry that underwrites her worth.

This six-hour train from Delhi to Kanpur
leaving the natural desert for an industrial dust bowl.
Is this adventure? or a best dressed Death by Solitaire,
Scorched Tongue by Milk Tea, Abstinence from the Toilet Car.

Laxmi wears a good sari on the train, a signal she is of the gentle sex,
reassures the fellow guests, she is no wedding crasher,
will steal no tokes or babies, issue no curses, flash no evil kohl-made-eye.
She is not sure what I'm trying to dispel with my show of silks.

Arriving together, we are given a room with a double bed
a wheezing working-class air conditioner. Relieved, we strip down
to blouse and petticoat, we have nothing to change into,
we just lie on the given bed, close our eyes, share a minute's dream.

From the view looking down, how much could we be mistaken for each other?
for sisters of some kind: bodies of the same size, but she makes hers
more shapely than most born the girl sex and I usually less.
We are both a disappointment to our fathers, in some respect.

Laxmi and I, friends of a friend of the bride, but not friends ourselves.
A foreign body, a third sex, the same desire. She turns to me, accepts me
as her understudy, 'Dear,' she says, 'you should really wear some make up.
Chelo,** we should find the room harboring the men.'

*Hijra – a transgender woman, person of the third sex

**Chelo – Let's go

Parvati picks her battles

Rani is the regular maid
but she won't do toilets due to caste,
she is touchable, not scheduled or backward,
which leaves Parvati to clean up her own shit
on Saturdays while her kids
are at exam school studying maths.

While at Thunderbird in Phoenix
she started the weekly practice
of cleaning her own bowls.
Never told her mother when she called home.
Never called herself 'Indian' while in Arizona.
It confused the locals-- used to Apache, Hopi,
Navajo, not Hindu.
No clue what it meant to be a Tamil Brahmin.

The closest she got to knowing looks
was when she talked of Gandhi—
everyone could conjure up Ben Kingsley's face
and know exactly where she was coming from.
Americans never got close
to saying her name the way it was intended.
In class, the profs called her Poverty,
so, second year, she started calling herself Pavs,
with a flat mid-western 'ah,' the ring of 'alacrity.'

When she cleans on Saturday, always alone,
Her mind wanders a bit from the porcelain,
just some loud thinking addressed to herself,
Which is a greater affront to one's sense of self:
to clean your own toilet
or somebody else's?

What would Rani say, as someone
closer to the frontline of daily indignity.
It depends, she might say, if you care more
what people imagine when you say your name
or what they call you when they see you.

Who am I to say?

*Where from madame?
Where from, what country?
Drivers always ask.
When I say, US, American,
They look again through the mirror
insist I'm shitting them,
No, madame, what COUNNNN-tree?
--this will go on, my origin in negotiation
until I give in.*

Chinese, I say.
Ahhhh. Ok. Yes, Chinese.
The driver, satisfied, throws me a *Konnichiwa*.
And then because he trusts my word, he asks:
*Madame, India or China?
Who will win?*
We sit in the warm exhaust of a flock
of 2 stroke single cylinder rickshaws.
His right hand teases the throttle
but he won't release the clutch until I answer.

This Delhi driver asks
as an Indian man to a Chinese woman,
in this unplanned heart-to-heart
can I give him an honest account
of this several millennia-old battle
of global economic and cultural dominance,
India or China?
What do I say?

Should I disclose that in China,
I am the opposite of Chinese.
If I used mandarin to claim myself such,
my mother would snort out her tea.
This girl is 100% US, she'd say.
(She snorts, but isn't she to blame?)
The driver knows only what I know,
that mine is not an American face.
Even in the States, people always ask,
insisting, *No, WHERE are you FROM?!?*

A woman from my office in Delhi—
just back from Beijing--
goes on and on about the millions of public toilets
they've built their Republic to shit and piss proper.
They even get regularly cleaned!
Not co-opted for goats or clothes
or grain as toilets here in India do.
The Chinese have won, she said, India's so bloody behind
it can't even see who's in the lead.

But this driver would never ask her opinion,
an Indian lady who'd bargain down to the paisa
but treat rupee coins as rubbish
when actually given change.
His bet's on me to give him the answer,
a Chinese girl in his country,
going out for late night kathi rolls
where the drivers eat,
down a misty lane near India Gate.

In truth, he already had his answer:
Who would win?
when I choose him
of all the tuk tuk drivers
circling the round-about like carion birds,
haggled with him a bit and looked self-satisfied
though we both know I overpaid.

*Hello (in Japanese)

Peers

To my plate,
Mrs. Nirmalashamy scoops rice,
moong dahl, a helping of okra,
adds a small dish of rasam
and two chapatis
the size of her palm,
standing all the while
to my left.

Dr. Nirmalashamy sits across
from me
and has already started
the focused work of fingers
making small balls of rice
to sop up his curry.

Mrs. N is not standing
to have greater leverage
on the rice scoop
to move between another table of eaters
or in anticipation
of pulling a dish off the stove.
She never expects to sit
or eat at all.

She is a woman younger than me,
married to a man
older and shorter and
more dowdy than herself.
I know little about her
except she makes
nice chapatis
warm and thin and soft
and she makes nice babies
wheat skinned, lucky
they all have Dr. Nirmalashamy's
strange nose.

He calls me by my first name
as an act of being collegial,
I call him Doctor to compensate
for the absence of respect.
I don't know what she calls me,

she only smiles, never speaks to me
directly.
I strain to catch what endearment
she puts to him,
telling him only
to offer me more to eat.

Would she eat with us
if I were a white man,
a Tamil woman,
a foreign student,
if I brought a husband?
Does she wonder what if
I invited her husband
to my home for dinner,
would I cook myself
or have someone else to direct?

In the absence of other topics
of conversation,
I just repeat how much
I enjoy her cooking
I want to keep her present
make her a part of this meal.
But that just respects
this troubling dichotomy:
the ones who eat,
the ones who make and serve
the ones who speak,
the ones who stand and smile,
as if they cannot be
embodied in one thing,
like the rice, both a peer
 and a utensil for curry.
If not for her
then also not for me.

Second skin

Loosening one's skin
by another
is old practice.

In a hammam in Istanbul
I stripped down, entered
a large marble covered room
sat on a low stool
facing a topless woman,
a towel turban on her head.
She wielded a long brush,
a washcloth, great hanging breasts.
I let her scrub me
offering one limb at a time
in response to her soft grunting.
I shone softly like wet tile at night.
My old skin fell
in rolled bits around my feet,
like the eraser dust from unwriting
a sheaf of stories.

In this state,
my mind was smooth and clean,
a blank Scrabble tile,
happy to be unnamed, not yet placed
at a beginning, a middle, an end.
I sat, a wordless animal
in front of a naked woman
I didn't know.
She could be my mother
the way she scrubbed
so patiently, rinsed me carefully.

My body felt jointless,
pliant, unstructured.
She directed me to lie down
on a hot marble slab,
a sacrificial dias.
And then, I panicked,
the words rushing back
Lie there? Why?
And then what?

The woman shrugged
unable to say, indifferent
as a reptile to her young.

*

*

*

Your body is giving
then slippery and filling,
but the sex feels rough,
degrading at the surface.
This first act is a silent,
tandem molting,
sloughing off the layers
of what was written—
the *what this is*,
the *why, what next?*
When it is over
we lie, side by side,
each with a slick new skin
pink and tingling, breathing softly
the effort evaporating
off the surface.
We are new to touch,
ready to imprint
wordlessly on one another.

Animal facts

This weekend we take Carol
to Dharamsala to see the Dalai Lama
because she is dying.
Yet his words do not impress her,
not the part about Tibetan death management
not the part about embracing suffering.
Nothing can penetrate the heavy crown of smoke
her breath weaves around her head.

I think she finds him aloof
because he sits cross-legged on a pillow
waits for those suffering
to come at him with questions.
He doesn't mingle,
seems indifferent to his body.
Carol comes from a different school.
As an anthropologist, she seeks you out,
talks to you about sex and
how you do it, where you find it.
and then she catalogs what you tell her
with what she's seen
and what she's heard from others.

At night, her voice carries down the mountain
from the balcony of the *Him Queen*,
we sit and drink, feel alive
in a bath of Carol's smoke
and the mist of our breath meeting cold.
She tells us what different peoples
believe about the clit.
How big is it, someone asks.
Carol gestures abundance
with both hands and a cigarette.
You'd be surprised
Did you know a woodpecker's tongue
winds around its brain?
that your small intestine, if undone
could surface a squash court?
And, if you do it right,
It feels like it covers miles.

She tells us stories

about her topless girl band days.
The we-were-broke-and-it-was-okay days.
Now-a-days she works the kind of job
that sucks up her spirit
so she can afford the drugs
that help her die by cancer.

On the train ride home
we sit, all five of us
curled up on one berth.
Carol draws the privacy
curtain around us
so she can offer a teaching
on the nature of a clusterfuck.
Imagine: a mass of sea snakes
coiled around each other
mating at the bottom of the ocean--
It looks a tangled, fucking mess.

But if you found yourself the snake
at the center of it
would you call that suffering?
Or that's just how life is
an act of intensive living
suddenly wound up in dying.
Really, she has no choice in the matter
but with a grin and a shrug,
clusterfuck is another thing
Carol is ready to try.

Thanks be
to His Holiness for a destination,
a reason to ride the overnight train,
with Carol and her animal facts
to know what she knows
of our wonderous bodies
how we live, how we die.
Let her laugh unravel out the window
waft down
the track behind us,
Let her pleasure
unspool for miles.

The Argument:

The Setting:

They call this *Jagganath Confronts a Monk*.
a study in contrasts,
I—my dark face, wide eyes, crazy hair,
You—the classic look of a Chinese scholar—
eyes half closed, Calm like a cloud-colored tunic
over loose pants and sandals,
even your toe hairs lay neatly combed
pointing toward Nirvana.

This dispute has been reincarnated
again and again over the centuries
With some irony, you have managed
the situation
with the placid bureaucracy
of colonial India,
imposing a promised time and place
for the Resolution that suits
some unexplained protocol.
Meanwhile, I spin
with the endless energy
of the modern CCP¹ machine.
If my wheels could touch the ground,
my shovel feel the earth,
I would push forward,
eager to construct
what ego makes inevitable.

The Analysis:

A classic conflict, but
what exactly is being argued here?

Outside Observer, look more closely.
Notice the large snake lying between the two.

Is it dangerous or desirable?
Does it offer fatal venom or an elixir to raise the dead?
Where did it come from, how did it get there?

(No one would suspect

¹ Chinese Communist Party

it was released from beneath the monk's robes.)

Jagganath shouts,

*This is not a debate on the qualities of the snake.
The argument is about whether it can be let go
before it is forgiven,
Or must it be forgiven first, to let it go.*

The monk demurs,

*The argument is purely academic
the snake already being dead.*

Monkeys in the memory palace

*The superior mind organizes what it knows
into a memory palace,*

says my accomplished Parsi friend.

She's not the kind to indulge in monkey mind.

*In India, they may patrol the walls outside Parliament,
attack pilgrims along temple paths,
but don't look them in the eye.*

*Never give a monkey entrée
to what is housed inside your head.*

Some people really talk like that.

I read the books she gave me on the practice
of constructing a memory palace.

But I wasn't convinced my mind should be
a warehouse for confusing facts.

I'll show you, she said, Take for example:

"A black panther in Africa is a leopard.

A black panther in the Americas is a jaguar."

First, imagine two rooms side by side.

*Label both doors "Panther." Inside one,
picture a quaint rondavel, thatched ceiling,
curved stucco walls painted black.*

*On a bed lies a typically spotted leopard
stretched out on its back.*

Can you see it? she asks.

Yes, I say, its eyes are dead—

bored from waiting years

to be retrieved from this abandoned state of mind.

You aren't finished, she insists.

*The room next door, hosts young pranksters,
their jaded accents—American,
bragging about the time*

they filled an envy green jaguar full of Cheetos--

--Wait, I say. In this case shouldn't the car be black?

* * *

And so it goes. Except, my mind acts
like a memory prison. Facts trapped
inside elaborate rooms I've forgotten how to get to.

Here in deep storage

lie the encounters with strange men,

inspiration for my Taj Mahal,
a mausoleum of what was fucked.

No pristine dome, no quiet row of sarcophagi.
Imagine instead: a confection of pink sandstone,
screened balconies looking inward to accommodate
any ladies in purdah who may be curious.
Artisans adorn the walls with erotic sculpture
while flirting with the women hanging camel bells
and strings of marigolds from the eaves.
This place stays open all night, the walkways lit
with terracotta lanterns in the shapes
of screaming peacocks, stampeding elephants.

Enter the first room, in the style of a fort palace,
a thick wooden door, a heavy bolt, a metal knocker.
From the inside, half asleep,
on an early foggy morning, it is hard
to hear the difference between an approaching lover
and the steward who brings the bed tea.
Convenient, if they arrive together, serendipitous only.
“Come,” is an appropriate response to the knock of either.

Here is another room, a 4-star hotel conference space
done up in black lights. A DJ stands in one corner,
plays an infinite loop of EDM,
spiced with a bit of mantra, a bit of bhangra.
A small, but well-cut man dances tirelessly next to me.
Caught in the strobe, he appears to be writhing,
only lit when twisting away.
The bass pulse disintegrates all feeling in my body
from my chest, moving outward.
My thoughts fall like dry sand behind my eyes.
I can remember arriving in his car,
but only “*What* is his name?”
fills the space formerly called my mind.

The room here echoes, the recessed bowels
of a Lutyens bungalow. In Chaos City,
this is the peace that only comes
with wealth cast in stone.
I stand outside the home office of a Nobel Prize winner,
while his assistant brings in a card for him to sign,
a present intended for an admirer

I have myself been trying to bed.
Suddenly, the terrazzo floors seem slippery-sloped,
I sense scandal erupt behind the office door,
threatening to overtake me.
One part of me wants to be consumed,
the other makes rat eyes for the doors
leading to daylight.

In one of the rooms, I may find Anirudh,
a doctor who picked me out at a conference,
cajoled me to skip the afternoon session, see some sites.
He promised a stop for Lucknowy kebabs,
Nawabi sweets, a type of surprise.
This room we're in just has uneven floors
no décor, just black veins of mildew cultured on plaster.
These are the ruins of Bara Imambara,
a palace constructed to pay wages during a famine.
The rooms built up during the day by the poor
broken down in the evenings by the nobles.

The resulting style of architecture

*is referred to as 'Unintentional Maze,'
a thousand pathways to reach a single door.*

Anirudh read it to me, translating the plaque of carved Hindi,
describing the thickness of the walls, hidden hallways,
a history of spies and intrigues, as if I could not simply read
the words in English printed to the right.

We were three stories high, open arches to both sides,
vulnerable to the view. *There*, he pointed,
forcing my head to turn, *see the river bulging.*

This is the most swollen it will get all season.

Suddenly Anirudh grabbed my hand
and pulled me near him, we stood
side by side, both our foreheads against the wall.
His head bent, eyes closed as if in prayer.

--What odd mating ritual was this?

And then, behind me, I felt the whisper of fur
or was it the sound of breath, unhuman?

We stood silent, while a gang of adolescent monkeys
pushed past us down the passage,
slightly-built but powerful, chattering to each other,
showing off their teeth and pissing.

"Don't look them in the eye," he whispered,

his body softly shaking.

He held my hand in fear that I would disobey him.
After a long minute he moved, silently,
never looking back, he slipped
 down the stairwell
 as if
 I had always been
 in this empty room alone.

Where does this leave me?
what room? which prison? whose palace?
Peering in or looking out? recalling facts
or conjured up by someone else's account?
Should I join the ladies
perched behind screened balconies,
try to find my way out without a guide?
Or am I meant to stay right here,
the garbled subject these rooms were built to contain?

Maybe this palace was always the real estate of monkeys.
As I amble loosely along the halls,
I think, *Am I the one the men should avoid?*
Should they turn quickly toward the wall, shake quietly,
close their eyes and when they feel my breath
upon their neck, pray to their god man
I pass them by.