The Marble Orchard
Sandeep Parmar

The Marble Orchard

Shearsman Books
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‘A little bloodstained clockwork in a puddle of blood.’
—Peter Redgrove and Penelope Shuttle,
*The Hermaphrodite Album*
Invocation

To be of use, but nothing will decant. Perilous consonant, seized as jewel, betrothed as fire is to the ordinary. A spell; a note. Combatant of will and engraver of sighs. Poultice to the hush, to the whispers of women in corded rooms and to the glows beneath doorways. Purchaser of anointments, slatherer of knives and spoons. Rind of merciless ends and clothier of borrowed aliases. Trenchant penurist, hoarder of silvered lakes. Post chaise bending on the whim of royal deliverance. Coin to whom there is no weight to match the fruit of emptied forest. Animal to cistern, face to coda, god to neither me to neither them, to she. To whom one is infinitely married, and yet cannot be affixed. Enter. All that spills over from my able palm is you.
The Octagonal Tower

‘History is the love that enters us through death; its discipline is grief.’
—Anne Michaels

I.

Whatever rage has come through these sealed doors, and scalded us black and frayed, we have no name for. We cannot explain the quiet, sleepless shift of whispers, a procession of shrouds along our corridors, or the diverted eyes that cloud to see a row of winter oaks outside shocked in their dendritic fizz. And if we do know it, it is in the blood, in this terrible synapse of sky, in the road away. From our house we drive down through a sunken valley where, like a crypt, it is forever the hour of the dead.

You have always worn the wheel, pushed your hands and wrists through its axes, as though it were a shackle. Driven, hunched. It is the same—the sting of yucca and eucalyptus, a vein of pink bougainvillea purged in hot pulses off rooftops—a fragrant massacre—and the same steady road you drive every time afraid to speak, afraid to ask when I will leave you alone in that house with your wife. I translate your favourite song in my mind: *This song of mine, no one will sing. This song of mine that I sing myself will die tomorrow with me.*

An October night, 1975. A sudden rain has liquefied the earth. Mud isn’t enough. There is a word you use that means more than mud, it is the sound of a foot, sunken to the ankle, pulling itself out—the awful suck of uprooting. Like a scream, it is the fear of standing so long that you might stay and sink forever. This sound trails behind you and your brother as you walk the fields one last time. You will leave and not return for ten years, to marry my mother who you’ve not yet met. Your four bare feet make an agreement with the earth, to remember. It prints its own response in your shadows.
II.

Holidays are uncertain times. The marble face of an old king’s grief deflects the spectacle of his queen’s death in each perfect tessera. The Taj rises above the Jammuna, doubles paradise in the mastery of slaves.

Holidays are uncertain times; their hands are cut off arms thrown up in celebration. Now they too mourn, and skyward pray to phantom limbs in the gardens of heaven, alone to pluck and preen.

They are carted away without ceremony, along with the remains of stone that, like teeth, fall out of swooning heads. The funeral begins. Mumtaz, hollow as a bride, is veiled in by her white, carved lid. No one knows when you were born. They think it was an autumn month. At five you asked where your mother was. Your soot lashes pooled with fear. Gone to your grandmother’s. Later you found her picture—a woman propped up, freshly dead, her hands emptied of the past. And you, seated on her lap, two years old, holding her and what held her forever in that exposure.

III.

The road widens past tracts of arched houses; you drive faster and grip the wheel. I say I won’t leave till after the New Year, but by now it doesn’t matter. Your knuckles are bloodless, and your stoic eyes are the calm surface of a timepiece.

Shah Jehan, imprisoned in a tower by his son, was sent a gold platter the day of the coup with the head of his chosen heir upon it. Seeing this the old king fell, knocked the teeth out of his head. For eight years he watched the Taj from his window,
from across the river, in a diamond mounted in the wall that reflected it a million times over.
The soft marble hands of his wife extended to him, to the empty casket beside her.
When the river filled, he walked across it.

When the door opens, only one of us leaves.
I watch your car until it is far down through the shadows of trees. The road receives you, and the house receives you, as does the galley of water, the trimmed hedge, the cold, sterile cell.

In your wallet, you carry a picture of my mother, from before my birth, when she was only yours.
Her pinks match the pinks of flowers; she bows her head into the branch and smiles, as beautiful as a queen.
Love is incidental, time-bound. It is the memory of love we love.
It is the memory that fattens on pain—of these small deaths and these stone walls. The crown that has sunken from your ears and hangs around your neck is all that remains.
Archive for a Daughter

November 1972, Derby

A dance card embalmed in sweat.
   Her ruthless curve of palm
mowing the carpet into sheaves before a gas fire.

Liquidescent virgin in a purple dress.
   Oil paint, shaded avocado, umbrella sun-wings.

Box 2, folder 20 ‘Early Married Life’

a single page:
   recto
   a fashionable centre-parting
   verso
   consonants: midnight affair nuclear affair bleach affair
   watermark indecipherable

[But here we are jumping ahead]

The archivist notes that no exact birth date is known.
An already Western dressed 6-year-old reads the headlines
of English newspapers for party tricks.
Her black eyes are blunt and unequivocal like the prophecies of pharaohs.
In a Punjabi village, she and her impeccable mother, gemstoned, oracular,
princess a vernal causeway.

Box 1, folder 2 ‘Emigration’

The BOAC stewardesses Max Factor crinkled baskets
of sweets to soothe the girl’s swinging, impatient feet.
Aviation—a risky endeavour in 1963—levels a curse at her progeny.
Aerophobia—her own daughter’s—
fear of the air between home and exile collapsing.
Homelands Grammar School For Girls

Miss Moore leans across an oak sea and parquets a line of future mothers. Her bovine sympathies, neatly pressed, tentacle towards the only Indian in the class. The Georgian battlecross marking her forehead, kindly and thoughtfully, segregates.

The girl bounds wildly through the Public Library—Huxley to her 11-year-old mind suggests individuality—but the Savage's feet recommend no one specific exit.

folders 8–17

Unbound Notebook, mostly unreadable:

I thought I could become a doctor and asking found I could not think to ask to become anything

The archivist notes that these pages are not continuous. Refer to Box 2, folder 10 ‘Correspondence’. A photograph of a prospective husband and several handwritten credentials.

Box 3, folder 1 ‘Notes on Motherhood’

Nursery—pram—groceries—pram—doctor's visit—cucumbers in half-lengths—over each shoulder some conspicuous intellect—

Husband-academic, wife-typist. She door-to-doors Hoovers, Avon, thick rosaries of factory lace, while her children pop tic-tacs for invented ailments in plastic houses.
Nottingham hurls snowballs at her black turbaned gentleman.

Soaked typescript, fair copy of a life—

When she asked her parents for a spare suitcase for an exodus,
they replied my child, nothing is ever spare

Box 4, folder 1 ‘Exile’

1985, Vancouver—ablaze with cherry blossoms from here to the kindergarten.
We arrived with one steel pot, a bag of lentils and an onion.

folder 2

1987, North Hollywood—submarine fences root Thanksgiving potatoes, one a piece. My daughter reads Laura Ingalls Wilder to her menagerie of dolls.
Raft sails calmly on.

folder 3

1989, Oxnard—Gifted children are purse strings.
We mind their collegiate years with interest.
El Rio wizens to a stockpile of citrus and rental agreements.

folder 4

1995, Ventura—Bibled to real estate, gold blazers cinch round a wade of blonde, leathered adulterers.
The neighbours tend their god-plots of lawn and hedge.

Box 5, folder 1 ‘Drs Parmar’

She saunas with the ladies of the Gold Coast—
one Japanese ex-comfort woman, one savvy señora goldbuckled and multifranchised.
and when my husband’s sisters wept
because I had no sons I said I have two doctors
(one of body, the other of mind)
and sent my uterus via Federal Express
to the village, with my compliments!

On the verso, written in ink, is a page from Box 1, folder 8 [misplaced]

I remember clearly when I knew that I would one day die.
I was on the toilet and I was 11.
The bathroom was white and oblivious.
Recuerdelo

_for Parveen_

Your word comes back
a caution not to act after the act

Picking blackberries in Leah’s yard
away from her mother
who had locked herself in the bathroom

We were young and bled easily into incautious hands
the thin-skinned spoils of weeds

In every month there were roses
given women’s names
dried in Santa Anas by day to be laid heavy with dew
at night when they dream of floating
on seamless lakes with hands at each sloped bank
that tremble and reach
but cannot break their sleepless sleep

Your word blinks away an ocean through an invisible porthole
It is how we remind ourselves what does it mean

That secret tongue impermissible as poverty
the smell of mixed fats frying
of lumbered bellies and their shirts rising

The eager hands inching up simple and sudden and silent
like the raising of a dawn-lit window

_Note: ‘Recuerdelo’ translates from the Spanish as ‘remember it’._