

## *Rectangular Days*

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In college I glimpsed the possibility of expression without words. I sang in the choir with B, indifferent to the words of the songs because I struggled to hear the notes, struggled to hit them with my untrained voice. I danced in college-level competitions, eventually quitting my team to join a contemporary dance class in the city. In my final year of college I moved from the media studies department to the English department. We were now a small, focused group of what can only be described as enthusiastic nerds. Despite my early revelation about the steely emptiness of the place, I enjoyed myself thoroughly: I hadn't gone grudgingly to an engineering college. I was studying literature and practising dance and music.

I had held fast to the idea that I was somehow superior when it came to writing, but I was now in a class filled with Ns. References to Nabokov and Joyce seemed to roll off their tongues, making me starkly aware of a duplicity in myself. I was an Avid in a room filled with Voraciouses. I wasn't enough of a Reader to be a Writer. What was more, in the light of my fledgling experience of dance, words sometimes appeared empty, and those who obsessed over them flimsy. The teacher of Gender Studies seemed interested in getting us to unpack words we had always taken for granted: *body, sex, gender, desire*. Then, at a literature festival on campus, she asked me if a photo booth my class had set up was meant only for boys. Her reason: it was a life-size cardboard cut-out of the bum-shaped chairs from the movie *3 Idiots*, with holes for visitors to peer through for photographs. I was shocked; this was the woman who had introduced us to French feminism, to lesbian poetry. "But ma'am," I'd sputtered, "what about gender studies—?"

"That's just for the classroom," she'd said casually, walking away from the bum-chairs.

Not long after, in dance class, we were working in pairs, learning how to make contact with each other. My teacher, smaller and shorter than me (but also larger and far more powerful when she moved), showed us how to share weight efficiently so that we could lift our partners. *It's not about strength*, she said, easily sweeping a man who stood more than a head taller than her off his feet. While we practised, we tumbled, fell, rolled and laughed; no one seemed shy that their T-shirts were flying about, or that they had to hold each other's armpits and ribcages and buttocks and iliac crests to assist each other in the dismount. (I found myself comparing dance class to the only other place I had been in such close contact with people who were not my lovers: the public bus. How different it is, I remember thinking, when you *choose* to be close to someone, when you don't mind at all that their body is going to press into yours, when you give them permission to lean on you.) Here, in this classroom, words weren't squatting stubbornly, impatient with my questioning. No one handed them to me with the instruction to unpack them. Yet, they were shaken, wrenched from their seats, vibrating with the energy of things to come; then they melded together like so many globules of mercury, my skin glistening with the life of them. You can't form words the same way once you've been danced.

Still, dance was a foreign language. Like Japanese had done three years before, it laid out before me a universe of possibility: the chance to reinvent myself, to shed the skin of the known and discover new life within me. I was quick to embrace it, even though it would take me years to even consider that I would ever be anything but alien to it. In our World Literatures class we had read that Orhan Pamuk was twenty-two when he decided to be a

writer. I was twenty-one. There's no hope for me then, I remember thinking. I am not hungry enough, or knowledgeable enough, or even tormented enough, to be a Writer. Above all of this anxiety was my worry that I would become embroiled in the politics of language: I was too Anglicised to even dream of writing in my mother tongue, Kannada; too South Indian to write in Hindi, I was only really capable of writing in English, but that would automatically render me elitist, even though I balked when I heard distinguished Indian writers and artists speak, their silken English worthy of the BBC. (Against this set of confusions, I conveniently ignored my own Goldilocks English: fancy enough for writing, and Bangalorean enough for speaking—so *just* right.) Whichever way I looked at it, it was only fitting that I shelved my childhood assumption that I'd be a novelist someday.

Reason seldom features in self-deprecation, or fearing the unknown, or whatever that was. When I look back, I see neither serious doubt in my abilities nor submergence in privileged guilt. The real reason I was reluctant to write, I think, is because I was afraid of dusting every last nook and cranny, of peering into every dark corner. The World Literatures end-of-term exam had asked us to compare the politics of Pamuk and Camus; I had piled my paper with poorly concealed delight in Camus, and come out of the exam thinking of the two as diametric opposites—Pamuk with his thrust on the work of looking inwards (which I saw as indulgent, and therefore derided), and Camus with his conviction in engaging intimately with the outside world. The fallacy of my conclusion escaped me then—I had not considered the interaction of this outside world with the inner world. (I was also yet to read Camus's *A Happy Death*.) Perhaps I had limited access to both; maybe I had succeeded in maintaining the chasm I had instituted when I separated my journal from my diary. While my diary was casual, conversational, an outside-in reflection of the everyday, like a walk in the park, my

journal was a central vista, an edifice for a fantasy version of the inner workings. It was hollow, like an echoey toilet.

