

## *finding my way Home*

*Monsoon, 2015 (Mumbai)*

A brown body, dotted with pigments of black and white, was on top of me. It pushed itself into me noisily and rapidly, as if making up for lost time. I knew it was him. I couldn't see his face but I knew it was him. But I couldn't let him go. I was holding on to the folds of the sheet I was sleeping on, bobbing my head from left to right but nothing broke the spell. Our bodies were surrounded by walls wrecked by seepage and there was a faint smell of decay. I remember feeling warm in that vision, sweat slowly trickling down from behind my ears, warm breath leaving my mouth. I wanted to slide from beneath him and run, but also live in that warmth for a few more minutes. It was only when I felt a wetness trickling down my thigh that I was wrenched (back) into reality. I sat up awake; wondering why after all these years, his memory, rather his image, could still stir such desires in me. It had been six years since I last saw him, and I was still waking up to wet, spoilt shorts.

*Summer, 2009 (New house, Lucknow)*

As soon as I reached home from school, I rushed to my room. I remember being surprised at the sight of my mother sitting on my bed. Nevertheless, climbing onto the mattress, I placed my head on her lap and without uttering a word, started sobbing. Before she could make sense of things, the sobbing had progressed to bawling. She shook me, asked me what had happened. But I continued to cry, the flow of tears camouflaging as answers to her questions. She persisted. "*Kuch kiya tune? Koi ladayi karke aaya hai?*" I shook my head in denial, my lips shut tight. "*Phir keya ho gaya beta? Kisi ko maara tune? Koi ladki ka chakkar hai?*" I pursed my lips even tighter. Helpless, she also started crying. All this while, my tears were at full flow, pretending to compensate for all the 'mistakes' of the past (several) years. As if reading my mind, my mother asked, "*Koi ladke ka chakkar hai?*"

*Somewhere between 1997 and 1998 (Old house, Lucknow)*

I was fidgeting with my school bag when he entered the room and placed the pencils I had asked for beside me. After ensuring they were the required number, I put them in my bag. I didn't know he was still around until I felt his hand on my back. Soon enough, the touch became a caress, moving up and down the length of my shirt. I didn't raise a voice, neither did I move his hand away. At that point, it was just a caress.

*Summer, 2005 (New house, Lucknow)*

We were on my bed, our naked bodies rubbing against each other. At some point, I felt a hardness throbbing against my thigh. Looking into my eyes, he said, "*Kuch nahi hoga, ek baar kar ke toh dekho*". I was hesitant. "*Main zyada zor se nahi karunga*", he assured. Believing some gentle stroking would suffice, I held the hardness in my palm, encircling it with my fingers. But I guess that wasn't enough. He promised he would just rub it against my back and I, taking him for his word, turned over. He did begin gently. Within seconds however, the hardness proceeded inside, accompanied with loud thrusts, the noise reverberating throughout the room. I let out a small shriek, but no sound reached his ears. Only force emanated from his veins, pinning the body underneath him to the bed, its fingers finding refuge in the folds of the bedsheet, too frozen to move, too shocked to scream.

“*Kisi ko mat batana, memsahib ko toh bilkul bhi nahi,*” he cautioned, before pulling up his trousers and leaving for his room on the roof.

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Whenever I’m home, I find myself pouring over countless photo-albums maintained by my parents through the three and a half decades of their marriage; some from an earlier time period. These pages feature not just the four of us (my parents, my sister and I) but anyone who has made a presence in our lives; in this case, a recorded presence. Grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, neighbours, friends, landlords, tenants, pets, acquaintances lurk in those matte, glossy and sometimes torn surfaces. Despite such repeated viewing, I still come across some unknown faces, unable to place them in our dense family trees. “*Ye kaun hai?*”, “*aur ye?*”, “*inka kya rishta hai humse?*” dominate my interaction with these images, directed at my parents who, by now, are probably frustrated of these inquiries.

In 1999, we moved to our new house. Before moving in, we often visited the land-site, my sister and I fascinated by the dug-up ground, the deep furrows almost forming a labyrinth on which the new house would rest. We wandered in the maze of unfinished walls and door frames and were shown, in different stages of being built, an (our) unfinished room with doors and windows on all sides. When I look at photographs from the time we started living here, I see him; in the midst of us all, during festivals, family occasions, in the kitchen, the terrace, the garden, standing next to me under a hibiscus tree smiling into the camera. In one of the photographs, I see him concealing a smile, standing amongst us four, probably overwhelmed at being included in a ‘family photo’.

Viewing these photographs as a visual timeline of the period our family spent in the new house, I sense a dissonance between the (projection of the) image and my memory of the captured time. The photographs, in addition to bearing the burden of documenting (changing) bodies, are also marked by the brooding presence of a memory which the camera has failed to unearth. Perhaps, only I (and he?) can place a finger on such a presence and direct the eyes of the viewer to another layer within the image. Tell them, you aren’t seeing the whole picture.

It was this dissonance that propelled me to begin creating a photo-album of my own: to make images that unearthed memories concealed underneath the carefully framed ‘family photo’. It was easy to conjure such images in my head (perhaps they had always existed there) but depicting them by means of the camera presented a challenge. The memories were inextricably tied to spaces within the house, and with the passage of time, those spaces had dramatically and irreversibly transformed. So, how could I (visually) stay true to the past? How could I depict the past when the site(s) of the past hadn’t retained their appearance?

In *Before and After: Documenting the Architecture of Disaster*, Eyal and Ines Weizman write:

“...absence of the event from representation might be seen as analogous to the effects of trauma on memory. Psychological trauma erases or represses precisely those events that were hardest for the subject to experience, and these gaps forever keep any recollection incomplete and indeterminate.”

This became my objective. To fill this image-gap, so as to arrive at a better understanding of the past, so that the existing photo-archive didn’t assault me with an incomplete appearance, so that it didn’t paint me or the past with a unidimensional stroke incapable of incorporating multiple (violent) realities within ourselves.

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I decided to re-visit the albums. Focussing my gaze at photographs which depicted the family *and* him, but mostly him and me, I began removing, scanning, and saving a few of them: the number of photographs I ended up with was rather startling. For the secrecy that enveloped our ‘interactions’, I was a little unsettled seeing our faces out there staring into the camera pretending everything was fine, the people around us oblivious to our secret engagement.

I wanted to turn everything inside out, peel the layers in the photographs and expose another dimension, that of a (lived) reality. This re-viewing sparked a tussle between memory and representation; though mostly in my head. Writing about ‘postmemory’<sup>1</sup>, Maria Stepanova, in *In Memory of Memory* says:

“The work of postmemory is an attempt to animate these structures, to give them body and voice, to revitalize them in accordance with one’s own experience and understanding.”

In September 2018, I had the chance to listen to and view the work of Sina Niemeyer, a visual artist from Berlin, Germany. She was speaking at the Indian Photography Festival, discussing her recently published photo-book *Für mich* (“for me”): an autobiographical story of sexual abuse; an attempt to come to terms with her experiences as a pre-adolescent girl. Niemeyer’s work revealed to me the possibility and consequence of taking agency over one’s (violent) past, of (re)imagining and possibly recapturing it in ways that (re)shapes the narrative for not only the viewer(s) but also oneself.

I started giving shape to my memories. Trying, as much as I could, to align them with the (lived) reality. I placed these newly made images next to old photographs from the family albums. The palpable difference in this juxtaposition came to constitute an element in itself: the camera had indeed failed to capture it all.

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*Summer, 2021*

Sweltering heat, my dog panting at my feet, cheap plastic gloves soaked in sweat covering my palms and a car whose driver refused to turn the air conditioning on because “*us se virus car ke andar hi ghoomta rabega*”. The sunburnt grass, the shiny metallic railing and several milestones ran behind me. After what seemed like ages, I looked out of the window. ‘Next Exit: Lucknow’.

I arrived home in the summer of 2021: the expectation of a transitory stay soon turned into the reality of prolonged residence. A death in the family upturned everyone’s hopes of co-habitation in times of a pandemic. Prior to this summer, my home-visits were almost always preceded by mind-numbing anxiety. Not only because of his image and/or memory, but also because of the fear of sliding into the same (familiar) pattern as before. Earlier, I tried avoiding such a possibility by ensuring brief visits: an onset of anxiety would soon be overtaken by the thrill of departure. As Brian Dillon, in *In The Dark Room*, writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Quoting Marianne Hirsch’s classic work, *The Generation of Postmemory*, Maria Stepanova describes ‘postmemory’ as “*structure* of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall....” She goes on to describe it as a “kind of an internal language, establishing horizontal and vertical lines of transmission (and cutting out those who have no right to speak it)...Like language, like photography, postmemory is far more than its obvious function. It doesn’t just show us the past, but changes the present, because the past is the key to everything that occurs in the daily present.”

“I need to keep moving, to avoid getting tangled in the threads of an unnecessary and lethargic recollection. On no account am I to let my body be caught in attitudes inherited from the life I had led here, or feel myself repeating the gestures of the past...”

2021 marked two years since I started collecting old photographs and making new images. Whenever I resume this exercise, I find myself at a crossroads: should I (voluntarily) run through this memory-landmine or idle about at the fence, wait for the storm to arrive? I have often wondered, and more often been asked, what I want to achieve by this ‘project’. Mostly, the response is a rehearsed, carefully worded set of statements. However, when alone, I’m vertiginously cropped out of this rehearsed façade: questioning why I began this journey in the first place.

In the midst of this equivocality, the boundaries of one element started becoming less blurred: the space(s) in which those incidents occurred. The house I grew up in<sup>2</sup>. It might be difficult for me to confront *him*, but I interact with the sites of those incidents almost everyday. The memory of those incidents is inextricably tied to a room, a corner, a bed, a closet, a wall, its colour. I cannot seem to recall anything without (the structure of) the house as a background.

I realized the need to (re)examine my relationship with this place: re-inhabit it; familiarize myself with its nooks, step out of those corners which had so far pulled me into their depths possibly colouring my relationship with it. After a gap filled with calls from the hospital, midnight emergencies, sickness, death, I resumed making images. I did not have an objective this time. Unlike before, I did not want to embark upon a path of reconstruction. I simply wanted to capture a fleeting moment, a daily occurrence, a spot of light. In this sense, I departed from Dillon’s motivations behind collecting images of his home. He writes:

“I am accumulating images, but keeping my distance from the depths of these rooms, as if the nothingness at their centres might swallow me whole, drag me back into the memories I have finally left behind.”

I have lived in those depths, I have felt that nothingness and I have been swallowed by its memories. I have been dragged into an abyss countless times, becoming familiar with its all-consuming darkness, at times finding comfort in it. In searching for spots of light, I am perhaps reaching out to them; hoping they find their way to me someday.

I guess I am just trying to find my way home.

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### ***A note on the images***

In the accompanying pdf document, there are three kinds of images: captioned black and white (chronologically, most recent); scanned/digitally saved copies of photographs from family albums ; and coloured attempts to re-emote the past, placed in this order.

### ***References***

*Before and After: Documenting the Architecture of Disaster*, Eyal and Ines Weizman, Strelka Press, January 2014.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘The House I Grew Up In’ is co-incidentally the title of a collection originally published by the RAHI Foundation in 1999. It is an account of the experiences of five Indian women with childhood incest and its impact on their lives.

*In Memory of Memory*, Maria Stepanova (translated by Sasha Dugdale), Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021.

*Für mich*, Sina Niemeyer, available at <https://www.ceibaeditions.com/store/books/fur-mich/>

*In the Dark Room*, Brian Dillon, 4<sup>th</sup> edn., Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017.

*The House I Grew Up In*, Ashwini Ailawadi (ed.), The Rahi Testimonies, 2005.

### **Translations**

“*Kuch kijiya tune? Koi ladayi karke aaya hai?*”: “Have you done something? Did you fight with someone?”

“*Phir kya ho gaya beta? Kisi ko maara tune? Koi ladki ka chakkar hai?*”: “What then, son? Did you hit someone? Is it about a girl?”

“*Koi ladke ka chakkar hai?*”: “Is it about a boy?”

“*Kuch nahi hoga, ek baar kar ke toh dekho*”: “Just try it once, nothing will happen”

“*Main zyada zor se nahi karunga*”: “I won’t do it with much force”

“*Kisi ko mat batana, memsahib ko toh bilkul bhi nahi*”: “Don’t share this with anyone, especially *memsahib*”. (*Memsahib*’ refers to madam/the wife of the *sahib*/male employer)

“*Ye kaun hai?*”: “Who’s this?”

“*aur ye?*”: “and this?”

“*inka kya rishta hai humse?*”: “How are they related to us?”

“*us se virus car ke andar hi ghoomta rahega*”: “the virus will keep circulating in the car”