

Mapping the Furnace Room

by Asher Ghaffar

1 When he was a child he had a passion for mapping the house, the earth: archaeology, de-stratifying and stratifying. Imagining maps in his cobbled mind. He walked around the block with a question in his mind that had been bottled in the furnace of the house. A question like “who am I, here?” and upon arriving at the same point on the block, the same question would blaze up. An inflammatory question forged in the furnace of his house when he went to fill a pitcher with distilled water and clambered over a mountain of photo albums to arrive at the distiller.

At one point in my little brother’s dreams, I went back to Thunder Bay. I was terrified at arriving in an absent place, a buried gable. This would add another scale to an already bat-like existence, where stumbling was the same as walking through the heat of another place. If one kept oneself open this long, the heat would either sear them, or the cold would make the bones release stories. Either way there would be stories.

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The furnace room was where we kept distilled water, picture albums, newspaper clipping of father topping his class in Pakistan, but never getting a job because he wasn’t white enough in Pakistan. He was no gentleman, bric a brac from Britain, old clocks, telephones. The floor was cold and uninviting and there were skis and imaginary mountains as soon as he walked in — objects could yearn in absence and have an independent life when doors closed those doors could be an opening in another room: a hinge unhinge another place. Dogs could still run in dreams when their paws twitched; the furnace could die and when it did there would be a fight and in the argument a landscape vast as an atom — a disappearance into white maps — or there could be the tropics. And we could love white. And we could act our parts and slightly change our names, but those lost letters now are living in another room unhinged, where there is no furnace and the heat could kill you.

2 We never arrived, having never left. And always we would leave a door open to a past, to a bullock cart, to a servant, to congenial conversations in the living room. The grammar is still there, but the words would be for our children to figure. We never taught them a mater tongue. We never tongued them. We weaned them in white.

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Already space is auditory, clacking hinges, a furnace humming in the morning, bamboo frames (somewhere else). Already space is a mackerel slipping from fingers back into sugar cane clattering, hexing the way that a sentence could move if it remembered. A word dismembered is a new member of the family. Plates underneath the earth could quake or cleave and forge another signature over and over again. We shift from India to Pakistan to Canada. There are scattered clothes of a dead brother whose name we must archive at some point. There are sounds that twist and wind, arriving nowhere.

3 Father says something like: I should have one more wrinkle, but I desired immortality, before that I had noble intensions to send money home. In 1947 I was a child. In 1947, I gave a speech for the formation of a new country. In 1947 I will never grow old. In 1947 I killed a Hindu. In 1947 I may have thrown a knife in the Indus. The Indus eats away the shore, an autoimmune disease. I release dead bodies from my mouth who were killed on a train to Jalandhar to Amritsar. There was confusion — now I am.

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Someone tried to get on a train to Pakistan and he was shot dead with his leg left dangling from the platform. These are portraits now draped in white linen and the snow covers my tracks. I am a detour to another room. I could unwalk and unwalking could mean mapping backwards. If I let the snow melt I’ll find my feet. Winged, perhaps.