

Fragmentaria: a book of notions
Sampurna Chattarji

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FRAGMENTARIA

*Catalan for the first-
person singular
conditional form of
fragmentar (to
fragment)*

A book of notions

*born of the New
Passages project
(Kolkata-Stornoway)*

dedicated with love

& thanks to

Anjum Katyal

Catherine Maclean

Casi Dylan

Sandip Roy

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Nalini Paul

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from the conversations

Jilipi / Jalebi

This is where it begins. In the whorls of a word pronounced the opposite of “no two ways about it”. What doesn’t alter in the telling is the juice. The thick soft swelling of it, no matter how much or how little remains of the original fresh out of the frying pan sizzle, the bite of it, crisp, almost unheard, like the stepping on a very dry leaf by a very small shoe on a very quiet pavement in my mind. The flooding sweetness in the mouth, where it begins.

**Clan maps in Asansol /
Partition Museum in Amritsar**

Both exist. There is no connection but the one I make. Between them—tracements. You, my friends, are feeling your way back to your origins. I have no such need. No sense of loss. Cianalas is not my ailment. (I pronounce it perfectly.) I keep saying “clannish” because that’s what we are, overnight. Collaboration—my clan. The scribbled note, my coat of arms. I think wistfully of the family-tree an uncle made. I never laid eyes on it. Who will find it for me? He (the uncle) came from our Punjabi-side. Their grey-green eyes, fair skin, tall build. Their affection welcome, though faintly frightening. Even as a child, my awareness that kin and kindness did not always go together.

Portrait of a wife

There were assistants (named), there was a wife (depicted). There were letters (affectionate) and a (second) marriage made on the ship back home.

There was a young wife (for whom delicacies were commandeered by a too-old doting husband who died too dull and boring), a young widow (who did not want to moulder).

There were contacts (there always are). Implications. It was not an untainted history.

Petronella wrote, “Please send pickled oysters and wine.”

Colin wrote, “Missing you and the ladies.”

Petronella, who sold her husband’s collection to the Company and planned to live on the Isle of Lewis with Mary, her spinster sister-in-law, until the end of her days.

Until the days decreed otherwise.

Petronella, who met, on the boat back home, a young soldier, married him at the Cape of Good Hope, got off at Plymouth and never set foot in her husband's birthplace.

Petronella, of the novelistic name, who was born in Ceylon, raised in Java and died in Brighton. As exotic a passage as any, a clever young woman who made babies with a strapping young man.

The word "young" a persistence. A smell.

Petronella, lucky not to have died like so many young brides of vapours (miasmatic) and fevers (tropical).

Petronella, survivor, your name so easy on my tongue.

**Why is this not public knowledge?
/ Who is collecting the material? /
Who controls what gets published?
/ What is worth preserving? /
Which past? / Whose past?**

The questions come, as questions will, impetuously. To raise them is to degrade the barriers between acceptance and rejection.

He absquatulated from his life. Surveyor General of British India, he died early, obscurely, a forgotten footnote in the annals.

He had an army of helpers—their names float at the margins of the books.

*Copied by JH Shanks, 20th Feb, 1819.
Copied by J Mustie, 29th June, 1819. Copied by J Goula. Copied by Peara Lall. Copied by Colin Mackenzie.*

To this list I add my own. *Copied by Sampurna Chattarji, 10th Jan, 2018.* My sketches of their sketches—monkeys in profile, picking lice—which I couldn't get a phooti bawbee for, if I tried.

**“The Scots were never more
enthusiastically British than in the
19th century”**

And why not? India was a couthy place to live in. Over lunch at the Calcutta Club in a Chinese Room in a house once owned by Macaulay we meet a person with nuggets.

Six of the British Viceroys were Scots. Post-1827 the British-admin went Oxbridge. The Scots went into tea and jute, *that's* how canny they were. David Hare, founder of Hindu College, a Scot. Colin Murray, photographer from Lewis, a Scot.

His brother was a planter. The PS Bhopal was docked at Kidderpore. The Scots were known as moneymakers. Tata Tea was once James Finlay.

Uncanny. We still hire bagpipers for our wedding baraats.

The question of time

What *is* the question of time? Is it just a question of time? Is *time* the question itself? Is it, already, question-time? When we sit on the stage and talk, all-knowing and self-deprecatory at once, our cheeks erubescant in the warmth of adulation, or too much sun, have we not simply found another way to pass the time? Have you noticed, when you're working, how much faster the time passes? And the minute we notice it passing, how urgent it becomes? The functionary knows what it means to say, "That was before my time." *Where does the palm leaf figure?* Out of time, the votive slippers step into my now, passengers in my boat. We oar more languages than one. That is how we slip away.

Contentiousness / Censorship

There must have been

Just as there always are

Biases/ Filters

Transcriptions on Paper

Surveyor Engineer Map-maker

Theatre of War

Work signed by assistants

Great Votive Slippers

Catholic Jacobite fascinated by Jains

Deconstructing the façade

Laying out the details

In his own hand

“Islanders get everywhere”

Oh, and so do we. Bengalis of bhaat-gloom and jol-bhora, Bengalis boiling eggs on mountain tops, Bengalis selling boomerangs in Melbourne, Bengalis with a flair for fankling the simplest set of threads between one story and the next. Bengalis with books entirely to themselves, more coming, and more. Hoorah, the Bengalis say, from generations of English storybooks. Hoorah for tea at four.

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The Kettle-boilers of Kidderpore

a hardboiled fiction

And so now I enter Invention. What a
cheeky gaberlunzie I am!

**“When this piece was crossing the
water”**

I wonder what it meant. Felt.

Exile like a fantastic idea known only
to bodies with souls inside them, like
monstrous whirring beetles.

This peace crossing the water into
foam.

The Society of Complications

It's so easy to set up one. First, find a stream. The fresher the better. It must be filled with fish (ruí, carp, telapia). There must be stones for the little fishies to hide and seek in. There must be a pair of hands. A Gollum in the throat. There must be a guddle. You grope with your hands among the stones where the little fishies play. You seize one and it's lunch. That's how simple the Society of Complications can be.

If you're lucky. The unlucky get to visit thrice. Unaccompanied by natives, the stones are impossible to lift, the fish impossible to catch. A few words in Bangla (even with a Scottish accent) are enough to open the Floodgates of Friendliness. *Hello*, the scowling carp says, grinning from gill to gill at the traffic crossing, before we flounder across. *Drop in for a cuppa tea?* Gobsmacked, we grin back, little bubbles of disbelief rising into the air, and promise, *Yes, of course, certainly.*

We leave tomorrow. Only one of us will stay and she has run the gauntlet thrice already. Triplicate, that ineradicable legacy.

Letters, signed, counter-signed,
submitted, lost. Re-submitted,
stamped, filed, forgotten, lost.
Recovered. Phones, answered,
slammed, ignored. Voices, ragged,
raised, shushed. Rules, enforced, bent,
elongated. Protocol, followed,
unmercifully. Precious manuscripts,
mishandled, unmercifully. Dust, raised
and settled. Masks, worn. Scripts,
deciphered.

We are a sub-cult of specialists. No
one messes with us. Our password is
Alarm.

**“A visit is a visit-visit. I’m here is
I’m here.”**

Some declarations are gnostic beauties. No explanations necessary. I float it, serene, into my book, and I wait, a noctambulist at noon.

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from the manuscripts

Habit!

He had an architectural habit that could not be broken. The idea of scale. Six feet to an inch. The cow was 23 feet and 6 inches. What a pantagruelic cow! Even human figures did not avoid his exacting measure. Representation, like a diagrammatic tic, twitching across the face of his world.

“burr is a boat”

Really? In which world? Is this a mis-transcription I see before me, its handle towards my hand? Come let me clutch thee! All my father’s Shakespearean lines are mine, to mis-quote as I please. Every new word related to a hunger for the old.

Was his a zetetic mind? The kind we gravitate to, like burrs to a wool coat? He seemed more plodding than seeking, more methodical than maniacal, more accepting of circumstance than rebellious...

I have no quarrel with him for any of his nobler traits. It’s his ego I wonder about. His name scratched large across a purloined stone. Purblind, a hole inside him that he tried to fill... Is that all it was? The collector’s drive to make up for inner lack? Are all fragments means of shoring up a disintegrating self?

What he placed against such questions was precision. The art of representing in faithful, perfectly-scaled sketches the bewildering bounty of Strange.

“different modes of virgin worship”

I wonder what they were.

Coincidence!

Among the glass cases at the Asiatic Society in Kolkata—where our guide is a lady well-versed in Sanskrit who excavated ancient Buddhist cities and wears a fluffy sweater over her sari—I fall through an epiphany the size and shape of a letter.

A letter written in a spidery petulant hand. The writing of a man I was once obsessed with—Csoma de Koros, *The Hungarian Who Walked to Heaven* and owns a poem I wrote. Manic grammarian, reluctant monk, obsessive ethnologist.

Obsessive ethnologist who wrote a letter to the very same man who helped catalogue Colin Mackenzie's collection! Horace Hayman Wilson! Felled by exclamation marks I strike my brow! I tell my friends, my co-cultists, of my exciting discovery!

My exciting discovery which would never have occurred had I not come to the Asiatic Society where I had never come before. Csoma de Koros's letter would never have been seen by my own two eyes—the only link between these two men.

These two men I'd never have linked had Mackenzie never come to Kolkata, and I come tracing his steps. That letter a thaumatrope, and my seeing it the dizzy-spin it needed to become.

***“a hollow monolith of the male
type”***

is all around me, still. just one little
keek and you know this hollow
monolithic male is not my kind send
him crashing to the ground let him
atone for uncommitted sins and
brazenry the signatories of Silence and
Supposition the marauders even when
frozen frightening

“women and children under a tree”

What makes this remarkable is that
there is no tree.

Who erased it? Forgot it? Mis-labelled
it?

I want to rubricate the letter E for
Error—big and bold and red—beside
it, elaborate with leaves, a big bold red
tree for shade and perspicacity, for
truth.

“The God Shani or the Planet Saturn whose evil Spirit constantly dispensing Ill luck & Misfortune & hence mounted on the Raven”

He liked Poe. This is one surmise I make. Let it rest.

For the rest, I am familiar with the great god Shani. My grandmother knew him well. Rahu and Ketu. Omongol. Also known as Awe-mongol. The opposite of good fortune, worth being awed by.

I once met a boy named Mongol in a forest-hut in Bengal. I thought Mongol as in ethnic group and wondered at the misnomer. Half-a-beat later, I understood which landscape I stood in and loved the christener for giving this beautiful boy such benediction. He cooked the best scrambled eggs I ever ate, and fish, in lemon sauce. He served us beer, chilled, and posed for photos with such inner calm it shook me, to the core.

The AshtaDick! Eight Celestial Personages or Divine Gods

How operose the inscriptions,
unlocking with a click of my amused
tongue

Hurryher!

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Paalcode

the code of milk

ArthuNaidesurer

half-man half-woman Arthurian Naiad

in usury

Jehaujpoor

the poverty of ships

***Narsimha: Nursinghee commonly
called by the Country People: The
Old Man***

That's him—my favourite monster—
the man-lion. Followed by ***female
boar with anklets*** and ***Kali***—skeletal,
the illustration like a precursor to the
Atrocity Exhibition—her navel an
eye—all those marbled skeletal
veins—and Shiva prostrate and
supplicant with his hands folded small.
Then ***Durga with Snake Girdle and
Penis*** and her very modern twin killing
Mohishashur while ***Doorga at
Sirwalla*** in a fez, like an Arab boy,
fierce with her lion-daemon.

***an aged man with a huge carbuncle
like a second face***

Drawn at 80 years, to whom at 60 this
excrescence appeared, June 1806.

Just like the solitary mottled figure in a
langot—striking.

Were humans artefacts too? These
skinny farmers, those byragees, these
Women Beating out Paddy on Rice,
those bleak brinjaries, each demanding
his attention—and reams and realms
of paper?

Were human bodies the ylem that
composed his universe before temple
façades and stone carvings? Historical
re-combinations, primordial matter,
first substance?

Flesh as expanding neutrons, gaseous
and forgotten.

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from the Cianalas of Colin Mackenzie

Slowly dying in tropical heat I dream
of boyhood weather

The drift of wood onto sandy beach,
the dark of seaweed tangle.

That other sea, that other blue, that
unforgettable heather.

There I am, putting stones into my
coat, and a silver spangle

Skimmed off the waves that come at
me, with soothing rushing roar.

If I had my will I would have picked
that lovely striated rock

Too large, too heavy, fog-grey swirls
and fleshy-pink, embedded – more

Like my heart than I knew then – in
native soil; a boat come to dock.

Oh, and that forgotten smell, never
found in burning dung, peat smoke

Rising from chimneys tall. I breathe
so deeply in they think I may

Slowly rise from my deathbed, well
again. Instead I gasp and choke,

My lungs full of flapping wings, my
mortal flesh slipping back to clay.

When I left my island home, what did
I know of loss and leaving?

That I, a man, would turn island too,
beset by foreign grieving.

When you went, did you see the
purple clover?
Did you spot the redshank or ringed
plover?

When you went, did you catch a whiff
of briny air?
Did you bottle it, bring it back for me,
with care?

When you went, did you watch the
tide ebb and flow?
Did the moody sky first glower and
then glow?

When you went, did you wait eagerly,
like me
For the fishing boats to come in from
high sea?

When you went, did you, with gusto,
just like me,
Devour a bowl of steamed mussels,
lemony?

When you went, did you clamber
through grass and reach
The point when the perfect view
robbed you of speech?

When you went, did you stop by at
the Town Hall
Where I worked for a while, before
the great call?

Did you post a letter to your dear
mother?
That's the place my father worked,
and my brother.

When you went, did you travel to
Seaforth Head?
Where the chief of our clan built his
great homestead?

As you stood there, did the loch
whisper his name—
Kenneth Mackenzie—and tell you of
his fame?

He buys the isle, he builds a castle, the
Earls
Of Seaforth follow—a fighting flag
unfurls.

When you went, did you visit their
graves, for me?
Barbara, daughter of Colin Mackenzie

Of Kildun; Murdoch, Alexander,
Mary—
Solicitude, benevolence, charity—

Could you have imagined my place in
that tomb?
Retracing one's journey back into the
womb?

When you went, could you have
foretold my last hours
In the miasmic fold of imperial
powers?

When you went, did you find
Stornoway to be
An interesting part of the globe to see?

Or was it, compared to India's vivid
soul
Somehow small, and vacant?
Somewhat cramped, and cold?

When you went, did you wish you
could have stayed on?
Did you mourn for those sons like me
who had gone?

Indefatigable and professional
All India's first surveyor general

When you went, were such weighty
words carved in stone?
Yes? Then why does my spirit feel so
alone?

