

GOODLANDS
WEDNESDAY, 8 SEPTEMBER

Valerie snaps four stems of sugarcane with a thump of her foot and kicks them into a pile.

She flops to the ground and looks up to a flat sky fragmented by the long straw leaves of the cane under which she lies. Silver dust from the flowered plants scatter the light across her face. She leans against a basalt boulder and rolls up the legs of her loose cotton salwar as far as they can go. Thin but muscular, her thighs glisten with sweat. The sun is already high, but a first-quarter moon, a perfect half, is still visible. She covers her eyes with one arm, her new green-inked, three-dot tattoo burning raw on her swollen wrist.

A light breeze from the coast, dry and balmy, tickles her bare feet. The humid season will soon unfurl; the cooler and refreshing days of the previous month are behind her. Strolling along the riverbank with her mother is a cherished moment of the past. Ma prepares and delivers lunch for the workers during harvest time, and her father has now ruled that Valerie carries the food basket only halfway to the section of the fields where he oversees the cutting of the cane. Valerie will witness her mother ambling through the two crossroads on her own, her swollen leg an impairment that her father dismisses every time it is mentioned.

At the edge of the fields, while waiting for her mother to

come back, she pulls out some paper and a stick of charcoal from a cloth bag hidden under her kameez. She bends one leg at the knee and places the paper on her damp thigh. She gently rubs the tip of the soft charcoal on the blue basalt rock and scribbles म in the new Bojpouri Devanāgarī alphabet. She keeps her forearms up to prevent them smearing the paper and adds a nose in profile and a vertical line. मून Moon. She inscribes the set of letters twice before blowing the charcoal dust away.

मून *pou leve after the strike*, she muses over a first line.

From the first day Valerie noticed Moon, the youngest of the workers, almost the same age as she is, she felt an instant concern for him. Her pulse raced, her chest hurt. Even her mother could see his effect on her. There was something Valerie could not read in Moon's eyes – haunted, glazed, remote. His pupils, dark longann seeds, spoke of a world she only thought she knew. She writes his name and draws a crescent moon, then sits back and unfastens the scarf that ties up her hair on top of her head. Knotted springs of thick, tousled curls run down to her waist, wriggling like the dangling arms of an octopus. The scent of amla oil her mother has rubbed on her scalp escapes from her hair.

Valerie rolls her nose stud and focuses on her writing. Her teacher at evening baithkā has encouraged her to jot down her thoughts about the strike.

*as suns set in exile on the many tongues
slashed to feed the soil*

Sometimes lines appear on the page that do not relate to each other. Valerie pauses, dissatisfied with the awkward flow of words. The field is quiet except for the occasional rustle in the undergrowth. She glances around, her nose and ears attentive to subtle movements in the withered cane leaves by her bare legs. A mongoose maybe or a family of tang, those pointy-nosed tenrec with soft prickles who

make dozens of babies in their burrows in the fields. The mature canestalks in their magenta, violet and yellow hues stare at her, their long leaves drooping. It is comforting to think that they are midway through the harvest. This part of the field will soon be cleared of the nauseous lime green of the ripe canes. She pulls herself from the landscape to scribble a few more lines.

*The sun makes the stars invisible
my hands are tied by wordy ropes
from a father's devotion to order.*

Better rhythm, she notes. She sighs and rubs her muddy toes. She hears the distant sound of footsteps and visualises her mother's slow pace, the fatigue in her limp. She imagines her mother's relief at the sight of the kalimay, the altar of seven goddesses, the low clay structure in one corner of the field where she will be able to rest. On the raised altar, seven half-buried pebbles sit in a line. Seven sisters to guard the camp and the workers, to bless the land that feeds and shelters them, and gives them strength to heal their broken backs.

Valerie lifts her body on her elbows to take in the ethereal atmosphere surrounding the earthen mounds which are discoloured by offerings of milk and vermilion sindoor. The kalimay stands between repose and labour, between the gaon where they build communal life and the scorching fields.

From where she lies, the cut-stone chimney of the sugar factory behind the kalimay pokes into the fluff of clouds like a leaning obelisk. The dark bricks, framed in lime cement, glare at her like a pattern of eyes. What if they are watching her, colonial guards scanning the movements of the freedom seekers they imprison as vagrants? What if she is not alone? Soon this ominous tower will be fuming thick smoke and her kurta will be stained by the ash of sugar dust. At the thought, her hands shake. She recites a prayer-song to the earth, heaven and the eternal.

Before her mother arrives, Valerie has time to sketch three more lines, roll down her trouser legs and rub the charcoal off her stained thumb and index finger. She folds the sheet of paper, wraps the charcoal stick in an old rag, then plunges them both into her bag.

*The earth grounds me
but my heart will not be healed
as long as the moon glows white*

As she gets to her feet and steps out onto the earth track, the heat hits her. She rolls her neck, her face like the dark disc of a sunflower twisting to reach the light. She giggles out loud, knowing nobody will hear her in the empty field, before moving towards her mother. From the distance, Ma looks like a large, blurred patch on the road that slices the field into two symmetrical shapes.

Her mother is wearing a faded maroon sari. As she nears Valerie, she attempts a smile. The truth is that Ma's tired, sunken face looks grave, and streams of sweat are gathered under her chin. She wipes them with her cotton sari and squeezes out a splatter of sweat. The pleats of her sari are tucked into the cord of her petticoat, allowing her to walk more easily, preventing the painful rubbing of her inner thighs as warm air caresses her skin. But the cord cuts into her flesh, settled between two mounds on each side of her navel. Valerie observes how the ruffled sari material bulging out at her sides makes her mother look like a kathākali performer she saw painted on the mobile cinema truck, though Ma's expression is not painted on. It is as real as the rhythm of her limp, as real as her cracked heels after long hours soaked in soapy water at the ros lave where she rubs their clothes clean on the basalt stone; as real as her sunburnt nose, the colour of a violet bruise.

Valerie offers to take the woven basket her mother has brought back. It holds a dozen sets of stainless steel katoras,

now empty of the boiled frwiyapin and stir-fried bred mouroum her mother had carefully placed in each section of the two-cylinder container – the breadfruit and moringa leaves she picked in the backyard early in the morning.

I'm sorry I can't help you carry the basket to the fields anymore, Valerie says to her mother.

There's nothing to apologise about, Ma snaps. What was meant to be was meant to be. Atas to seve. Why is your hair all over the place? Ma's Kreol tongue twists with her Bojpouri accent. She speaks as if she is expecting a confession from Valerie. Ek lav to nene do. Clean your nose stud, will you.

Valerie licks her fingertips and wipes her face.

Ma pulls up her sari and tucks it in again. Beneath her blouse, her love handles look like two uncooked farata rolls. When they reach the kalimay altar, her mother stretches her upper body forward, her face between the triangle her arms make. She stands, legs astride, her back as straight as a board, letting her belly bulge out. She invokes Kālī Ma, the cobalt blue goddess with one foot on the chest of a pale Shiva. Tongue out, bulging eyes circled in kohl, hands steeped in blood, Kālī Ma wears a garland of decapitated heads, thick gold armlets and anklets and a belt of truncated limbs. Valerie has grown up with Kālī Ma, the strength in her mother's heart.

Beti, her mother calls. Pass me the agarbattī. Did you practise your writing?

Valerie presses her lips together and mumbles as she rummages in the basket and hands her mother an incense stick and a matchbox.

Bolo na. Speak. Her mother is not tolerant of her daughter's grunt. Ma lights the stick, then bows to smudge the sindoor on her forehead onto the milk-washed earth mounds, and summons Kālī Ma to guard over her daughters.

I did. Valerie tells the truth in one lie. Writing poetry is not a priority as far as Ma is concerned. I copied lines from a play in Marati.

Why Marati? Her mother wants her to learn Hindi so she can read the newspaper.

We are studying this play at baithkā and a few of us are translating a short section.

I myself don't know how to write Bojpouri, my mother's language, her mother replies. She wants Valerie to write down the stories passed down to them in their ancestors' mother-tongues – like flesh, like music, as she would say.

I don't know the shape of the written words but I remember the form of its sounds.

Valerie promises to collect the stories and songs her mother has shared with her and preserve them on the page.

I will repeat myself on our languages until it sinks in, her mother warns, and slowly straightens her back, her hands pushing on her swollen, fluid-filled knees. The healer recommended rest, but Valerie knows her father has dismissed both her mother's pain and the doctor's diagnosis and prescription.

They leave the altar and continue their route for half an hour, their savatleponz, with craters at the heels and rubber soles as thin as cane leaves, flip-flopping, their soles massaged by the gravel. When the breeze drops, the air is heavy. They skirt around a subject that tires them, the old police officer whom her father has hinted Valerie should marry by the end of the year. Valerie is nearly fifteen and is of an age to bear children. Both mother and daughter are weary of hearing this tune from him, weary of how it repeats the history of the women who were brought to secure the male labourers to the island, have their children to ensure a stable supply of labour for the fields, and then coerce the men to forfeit their right to leave at the end of their five-year contracts, so as not to abandon their children.

They leave off a conversation neither of them wish to have; it is the way they survive, and they are aware of it. Valerie asks whether Moon was at work. Her mother is expecting this question. Deep lines carve her forehead, her

eyelids droop and her untied hair falls limp on her shoulders like an inverted question mark.

Your father sent Moon away.

Valerie did not expect this. The last time she saw Moon, he was picking up the workers' dirty plates and placing them in her mother's basket. The wind had glided across their faces by the stream where she helped her mother wash the containers. Her father had noticed Valerie and Moon in conversation and instructed her mother to correct their daughter's loose behaviour – talking to a boy she barely knew. Valerie is banned from entering the fields and she is never to speak to Moon.

How could her father punish her for joining those who stand up against the foulness of this land? A scorching breeze burns her nostrils, baking the brittle snot that she rolls between her fingers as she fidgets with her nose stud.

Her father works part-time as an attendant at the police station and during the harvest, between his night shifts, he takes extra work at the Belle Vue Harel sugar estate. He recruits and supervises a group of labourers on a small portion of the fields and Moon had joined him as a casual labourer for some extra income. How could he deprive Moon of the work that feeds him and his family?

Moon works for the estate full time, but because of his youth he was placed in the petite bande, and the sirdar had refused to upgrade the pay-band under which his salary is calculated, even though Moon had gained the strength of two men in the past year and exceeded his quota of cane to be cut. Her father knew that the estate workers would strike in the next few days, and could lose both their earnings and their dwellings. Her father was well aware of the conditions they are fighting: the damp barrack rooms, the lice in the dhal, the foul odour of urine from the latrines, the itches on their skin, the itches in their hair. But he refuses to support them. Her father's breath crawls under her skin like the rusty scald forming in the membranes of cane leaves under

stress or like the dried blood that remains under her nails from a scratched mosquito bite.

That day, Valerie had noticed how frail Moon looked. An oversized shirt, almost transparent from sweat, was stuck to his bony chest. He had barely eaten anything for the past few days. *Kot to gagn to lafors?* Valerie had started the conversation. Where do you find the strength? Aren't you too weak to go on strike?

Moon had looked with contempt at this suggestion. His body language was always more vocal than his speech. Everything about him – his tight jaw softened by his dimpled chin, the molasses-dark patches under his eyes, his sculpted hollow cheeks, the shadow under his nose announcing the beginnings of a moustache – cried out that his body was hungry for liberation. A blade of grass clenched tight between his cracked lips, he had hissed and told her he was born from a hunger that growled from the ground.

Even the sugar they sweat twelve hours a day to produce has been rationed, he said. Sugar never fed anyone but the owners' greed for profits. Each family's portion of rice had decreased since the cargo ships bringing it in were intercepted by the Japanese. Before the war, they would sometimes receive a piece of fish or chicken once a month. Now they do not know when their next meal will be.

Valerie had tried to offer encouragement, telling him about a certain Ton Michel who had a maize mill and had built the machine himself to make flour from corn harvested at Rivière Coko. Then there was the new Food Control Board which was pressuring landowners with more than twenty acres to allocate a quarter of the land for the production of root crops. Moon's response had been vehement. That's for feeding the troops and the *bourzwa*, the landowners themselves. Any food we plant will feed their stomachs first; we will get the crumbs and be expected to show gratitude. They only released settler land to grow manioc, our main staple, when we protested over food shortages. They tell us

to clear the poorest scrub land – land that was never meant to be owned – to grow root vegetables, but the crops never reach us. The war over there is killing us here.

Valerie knows that Moon thinks that land should be held in common, not privately owned. Sometimes he is a pool of thoughts whose bottom she struggles to reach. In his world people dare to gather, resist and refuse the state of abject survival they are subjected to.

She had tried to distract him by talking about his love for carving ebony wood and the poetry she was writing in Kreol and Bojpouri.

His eyes had lit up for a few seconds and then he had frowned, his delicate eyebrows meeting in a wave, and his voice had softened like the rustle of a mango tree on a windless day.

In the lack of respect our people face, he said, only our elders keep us dignified. At dusk, on our front porches, they teach us about the constellations and the moon tides and they compose music in different tongues.

Valerie could have stayed by the water and listened to him for hours.

As they walk on, Valerie vents her frustration. Why does her father hate the people from the estate, when his parents had lived on one?

Valerie knows her mother makes space for her to express herself, probably thinking the fire in her belly needs an alleyway of escape.

Your father moved out for a better life, you know, to build a family. Ma does not sound convincing and her words do not remove the friction between them.

What makes us better? Valerie retorts. That we have a hut that never survives a cyclone, that he's bought a small plot of land with a loan he cannot repay, that we grow sugar with our forsaken souls, or that he has the right to hit his own kind with a baton?

There'd be no food on the table if it wasn't for his job. Ma is plaintive, a weary mediator between Valerie and her father. Be grateful.

Grateful for what? Valerie feels only resentment. There is no consolation in her mother's fear of her father and her attempts to appease him.

She gazes at the chain of sleeping hills in the distance, ancient volcanic ridges, and wonders what lies outside the hamlet, outside the island. Why was it impossible to leave? Where could she find refuge from a home like hers?

She wishes she knew if her mother had defended Moon or at least tried to, but it serves no purpose to add to Ma's challenges.

Will Moon still be able to attend kolatam? she asks instead.

Her mother nods. If there is one place where Ma finds contentment, joy and a sense of validation, it is in the dance classes she conducts once a week, free for anyone to join, when time permits. When Ma heard Moon play the thappu drum during lunch break, she had asked him to join her kolatam crew.

Valerie is relieved. She will see Moon tomorrow.

Her mother stops to catch her breath, and Valerie urges her to lean on her shoulder. Ma refuses with a nod and a twitch of her mouth. There is no point insisting. Ma never asks for help, her sense of dignity a trait she stubbornly clings to. As they approach the thatched huts scattered among patches of banana trees, her mother tells her in a voice that is faint from weariness, You go get the fodder now. Chipko needs to be fed. The goat is her mother's pride, hers to own and cherish. She bought it as a kid with a loan she's managed to pay off from the sale of its milk.

As Valerie pulls the sickle from the food basket, her mother croaks. Pa trene kot sa lafontenn la. Now, don't hang around the standpipe, we need to go to the wake.

Who died this time? Valerie has no capacity for any more sorrow and grief.

Mind your tone, girl, her mother scolds, as she untucks her sari from her petticoat. Be respectful of the dead. Anarka's grandmother passed away in her sleep early this morning. Poor Anarka. Motherless twice. It's not easy for her. Your sister wants to be with her friend, so we'll go early with Priya, and that's it.

What a pain. Valerie does not want to be dragged to the sirdar's house for the ritual of condolences. Although they live only a few houses away, there is a deep gulf between the world of those who toil on the land and those who supervise them, or as Moon would say, a dormant volcanic crater is what divides them.

It was a year ago that their worlds first collided. Her younger sister Priya met Anarka during a harvest fire after the estate owner had ordered the burning of dry cane leaves and ignored the direction of the wind. Within minutes flames had engulfed the cluster of huts and wooden houses, burnt animals alive and turned homes to ashes. Anarka and Priya, running in terror from the blazing compound, had found refuge sitting under an oxcart with other children. Valerie had helped with the evacuation and had exchanged a few words with the sirdar's daughter, Anarka's aunt, who she knows also supports the strike. Valerie remembers how petrified Anarka had looked, holding in her tears, her lips sealed tight, hugged by Priya. The next morning, the two girls were found wrapped in Priya's ohrni and they had been inseparable ever since.

Let them be children for as long as they can, her mother had said. You know what awaits them as soon as they become little women.

Valerie had grimaced, reflecting that her mother's generosity knew no bounds. Anarka would not share the same fate as she and Priya. A sirdar's granddaughter with an education in English and French, with all the advantages of the middle-class, even if motherless, had wings far bigger than theirs. Valerie revels in the rage that seethes under her

skin, though she wishes she was kinder, softer, and more appreciative of her younger sister who is their mother's devoted soldier. Ma, with the pain in her knees and her frail health, would not last a day without Priya's help – stepping in to prepare the workers' lunch on time, and keeping their home clean to the immaculate standard that their father demands. Her sister, who welcomes lost souls, fallen birds, stray puppies and baby goats, cannot understand that Anarka has been handed the tools that will lift her from having to toil in the fields, tools that Valerie strives to possess through her own efforts, tools whose relevance she thinks Priya refuses to understand.

The wake will be tedious, so Valerie tries to calm herself, as her mother has taught her. Count 1 to 5, then focus on an object. Her eyes glide to the knife in the woven basket on the ground. She breathes in and out for a few seconds, then hooks the sickle across her shoulder, feeling the comfort of its curved blade.

As they part, her mother softly tells her not to be so judgemental. Don't overthink, girl. Valerie wishes her jumbled thoughts were not all rushing in her head at the same time, as if they were in a race known only in one part of her brain. She walks towards a stretch of land where grass grows wild and dense and reaches the open space where four washerwomen are using the only working standpipe in the area. Next to it, metres of sari material are spread out on coconut fibre ropes, flapping under the fine branches of the lilac trees. The saris' damp cotton caress her as she moves through them. Spotting a bed of grass under a bushy litchi tree, Valerie spreads her ohrni and lies down. The shade cools her and the long stems of grass cocoon her like the larva of a butterfly. Her fingers swirl and twist the fine grass, until their blades snap and fill the air with a dusty smell, like the scent of rain lifting dry soil. She rubs the crushed grass under her nose and starts to edit her lines until the words are crosses, blots and scribbles. Then she recites her poem aloud to the

accompaniment of the creak of the standpipe's hand-lever going up and down, the water gushing out of the brass tap, and the women's loud conversations.

*the moon never sets
my many tongues twist*

*a poem pours out of salty pearls of sweat
the sun outlives the stars each night
i have my hands tied by wordy ropes
from a father's slavish devotion to order
the earth grounds me each night
i have my heart scarred
under the glow of a blood moon*

★ ★ ★ ★

Anarka is hungry. She has been sitting on a wicker armchair since early morning. Her feet only just reach the ground, and the rattan seat pinches her thighs. The only comfort she allows herself, when no one is paying attention, is to squeeze her hands under her legs.

For the first time, her grandmother has not risen to the sparrows' chirp. It has never happened before and Anarka does not know what to make of it. Nobody woke her up for breakfast, reminded her to make her bed, hurried her to brush her teeth and wash herself. Why did her grandmother die? Who will look after her now? These are questions she will muffle down until she is allowed to speak. Tata has not uttered a word to her. Her grandfather has been busy greeting the visitors to the wake.

Neighbours and relatives flood into the front room after removing their sandals and leaving them across the three steps at the entrance. New visitors make eye contact with mourners already sitting in a line against one of the side

walls of the house. They then walk towards the centre of the room where, on two planks of wood supported by four vegetable crates, the body of her grandmother rests in a starched white sari. Her feet look discoloured, even more than they did in life, and her wrinkled hands are cupped, holding a posy of marigolds, daisies and frangipani. Dark lines stand out on her palms, marks that Anarka has inherited. There is an earth lamp on the floor at the end where her head is. Her aunt has been pouring oil into it all day to keep it lit, explaining that the light will guide grandimoun's atma on its journey to the ancestors. The departed soul will be thankful and able to rest in peace.

Some visitors pause in front of the body with reverence, others glance at the corpse and move on, as if taking part in a pilgrimage where you are not allowed to linger. Their saris and the hems of their trousers polish the floor.

Anarka has perfected the ability to stare at things, either to make them go out of focus or turn them into miniatures. She sees the visitors moving like a trail of ants. She imagines them hovering around leftover meals on the kitchen top, each creature stopping to pick up a crumb before scuttling away, until she lifts up the food to confuse them. What if a giant's hand scooped up her grandmother? What chaos it would create! Her aunt says her fertile imagination has a way of seeping through at the most unexpected times.

Anarka has lived in this house since her birth, but has never spent more than a few minutes in the sitting room, a space occupied by Tata and the men who visit him every day. The front room has been under renovation for as long as she can remember. The door frame starts above a skirting stripe of red paint; it looks like trousers on boys who have outgrown their clothes. New sheer curtains are temporarily hanging on ropes across the window to shade the room. She studies the dusty postcards from London, stuck and re-stuck with flour dough, which adorn one of the walls. They were sent by Tata's brother when he was studying in England.

She pulls the latch off her sandals, wriggles her toes, drops her chest to her knees and stretches forward to draw imaginary circles on the floor with her index finger. There is an orange glow on the polished floor made by the flame of the lamp that flickers as visitors pass by. This moment of contemplation does not last long. A firm grip on her shoulder pulls her up. Sit up. These are the first words she has heard from her grandfather.

Tata nods as a neighbour offers condolences – and switches to other issues soon after: the war, the difficulty of accessing basic food stuffs, the work conditions. Anarka lipreads their conversation, a skill she has perfected from being in her grandmother's kitchen. Tata's visitors often call to discuss their concerns, as if her grandfather was some kind of town minister.

My nephew Leetooraj has joined the army, one of the neighbours says. The man towers over her grandfather by about the length of a ruler. But his desolation, his drooping shoulders and bent body make him look shorter. He wears an oversized yellow shirt, wrongly buttoned, which falls over his faded trousers. Its tails look like the bottom of a kite caught in a tree. To Anarka, her grandfather seems to have a regal composure, despite the glowing brown and pink patches on his face. He has a skin condition called vitiligo.

My nephew wrote from Egypt, about the desert he has been sent to, the neighbour continues. They have a camp near Cairo where a certain Private Veeren Arran from Petit Verger and a Casmally from St. Pierre prepare home food for them. They seem well organised. You remember Sergeant Kishtoo and Captain Hein from the capital? They are in charge of the crew. He writes about training and rifle handling in Kenya, drills and sentry work in Libya and Palestine, carrying ammunition for the infantry troops. I know nothing of these places. Half of the words he uses I don't understand.

Tata explains that sentry work consists of digging trenches

as hiding places from which to watch out for the enemy.

Most of our sons have gone to war as clerks, stevedores, cooks in North Africa, the neighbour continues. I wonder if they even know what they are fighting against, whose camp they are supporting. In al fer pionie, Pioneer and Artisan Corps they call it, the neighbour laments, and Tata listens to him patiently.

My nephew has been shifted to the First Battalion and has met for the first time soldiers from Africa and India. I hope he comes back alive. We can't afford to lose another son. He is seventeen and would be a great help to us. But who can blame him? He gets paid more to lie that he is eighteen and join the army.

Yes, that has been the recruitment strategy.

Lakaz nou pena, the neighbour continues. We are housed in flimsy dwellings, but fortresses, highways and communication towers are built all over the islands. My son would not have died in the cyclone if our hut was half as strong as their buildings. My wife is still mourning. She lost her entire family to a stormy night when she was a child. She still recalls how her mother's skull was ripped open by a wooden beam, how she herself was found under the debris after a week, with tears of blood, unable to mutter the word water, barely kept alive by the warmth of her dying dog.

A convulsive shiver runs across Anarka's shoulders and neck, and her head shakes involuntarily. How horrible. What she remembers about the last cyclone was how the neighbourhood children took shelter in their kerosene-lit house. Theirs had been one of the first houses built in the area from wood and corrugated iron, and it had become the place for meetings, shelter, a help centre, and somewhere people's money could be kept safe. During the cyclone, her older cousins told ghost stories about chourel women in long white dresses floating in misty alleyways, as the wind blew through the cracks of the house. It was one of the few nights when she did not sleep in her grandparents' bed, too

excited by the thrill of these visitors to miss the warmth of the old couple.

But this conversation also reminds her of how, later, the rain battered on the tin roof, and the chinaware crashed in the display cabinets when the windows at the front of the house shattered. Panic. Adults barricaded the gaps with armchairs and wardrobes, even those made of expensive ebony that Tata had recently bought. She had nuzzled up against her friend, Priya, whose hut had been flattened by the blast. Lying on damp mats, they were unable to sleep with the raging noise. The night has been alive, raw, brutal, unforgiving.

I am sorry for the loss of your son, my good man, Anarka's grandfather says. Bizin get divan. You must look forward and forget the miseries of the past. This is one of Tata's core beliefs and Anarka is well versed in this narrative. Her grandfather taps the neighbour on the shoulder and holds his hands tight. Tata does not usually show affection, particularly in front of close family. He has shown no sign of loss this morning, after finding her grandmother dead, cold, with one leg dangling out of the bed. Her aunt told her that Tata had closed his wife's eyelids, left the room and sat in his armchair by the front window. He had then picked up *Advance*, the newspaper her grandmother would place daily on a tray next to his glasses, with a warm mug of English tea. Warm, not hot. Everyone knew his obsession with everything English – this diluted chai they call tea, her aunt once sneered.

Anarka stares at the plump sugarcanes outside the yard. Could she skip out of the house, cross the road and pick a ripe stem without anyone noticing? She would break the stalk at the knot and rip off the woody skin, then bite the crunchy flesh and suck the juice before spitting out the bagasse and licking her hands. The last time she stole a piece had been during the cyclone, after the landowner's patrolling men and dogs had left. Her grandmother had frowned. To pa ti kav lav to figir! You've got straw glued all over your hair

and mouth. And look at your clothes! They are stained with syrup. You're attracting all the ants of the neighbourhood! Her grandmother had said this severely. Though I must say well done for pulling off that hard skin, she added with some appreciation. It'll give you strong teeth.

Tough girl, that one. Tata had praised her for being fearless and resourceful. She had looked into her grandfather's face with adoration. When he smiled, the pale patches around his lips expanded and made him look mischievous.

She was born a survivor, her grandmother said. Tata had responded with something about a boy whom her grandmother seemed to wish had not survived. Her grandparents had both glanced at her, swiftly.

What boy? Anarka did not grasp what they were talking about. Her grandmother showed the same tough affection for all her eight sons and daughters, and their children, and she had even complained to Tata that spoiling Anarka like his little maharani because she was motherless wasn't doing her granddaughter any good. When her grandmother was annoyed, she would brush aside her grandchildren with the feathery fatak broom she was sweeping the bare ground with, calling them to stop running through the house and cursing her daughters for not keeping their children in order.

Thinking about her grandmother makes Anarka's empty stomach contort into a knot. Why can't she wake up and life return to what it was before? Her grandmother would cook her piaw, those flat doughnuts of wheat flour soaked in molasses that she loves. Or her favourite drink, alouda ver. She can feel the swollen toukmaria, basil seeds, rolling under her tongue, the refreshing sweetness of spiced, green-coloured milk and grated agar-agar dancing in her mouth. But any request to her aunt would sound selfish today. Besides, she is forbidden milk for another two days. Milk symbolises life and you cannot drink it while the deceased ascends to the world of the undead.

Every death announces a birth somewhere, her aunt had said.

An image of a foetus floating in a wild landscape and sucking out the spirit of a dead man flashed in Anarka's mind. This picture is framed on her grandmother's prayer shelf. When she had asked her grandmother whether a womb could be disconnected from a mother's body, the latter had stared at her. What an odd question she had exclaimed. Anarka had never enquired about the picture again, or her motherlessness, for that matter. She had even begun to wonder if her mother had ever existed. Her grandmother and her unmarried aunt have taken care of her for as long as she can remember. But why such complete silence about her mother?

Anarka stands up, avoiding the two vegetable crates stacked on each other, which despite their wobbliness are used as a corner table. A fougère sits in a rusty watering can looking like a spider on a hand-crocheted cotton coaster. Who will attend to the ferns her grandmother had religiously nurtured? Who will clip off the old fronds, test the moisture of the soil, caress the chameleon-like crozier, repot each spore and mourn the dead plants? It was her grandmother's favourite pastime and Anarka had relished watching her engaged with it.

Dusk falls and the discussions between her grandfather and a few of the neighbours warm up. Their voices fill the small room where her grandmother is resting, and they are hushed out to the verandah by her elder aunts. Anarka becomes more attentive when they discuss the strike at the estate.

I've seen those young lads, Marde, Moon, and all, keen to join the work stoppage. Her grandfather sounds as if he is condemning them. His opinion about the strike seems to echo through the group, except for the neighbour with the yellow shirt. Is Tata referring to Valerie's friend, Moon, who Priya has mentioned?

Perhaps the new generation is more courageous and hopeful, the tall neighbour murmurs. His eyes are cloudy and his shoulders hunched. He moves away as a stern man

joins them and gives Tata a limp handshake. This man has a face Anarka has seen before.

What a bunch of disorganised lawbreakers! 1943 will be a bitter year to remember, he says. We need to obey orders and mobilise for the war.

Anarka is trying to remember where she has seen this man. He has a bald head, a puffy face and a malicious grin that contrasts with his nonchalant composure. He wears an open saffron shirt with the sketch of a lizard on it. Before she can study him any further, she notices her friend Priya has finally arrived with her elder sister, Valerie. They are standing next to their mother who is bent over her grandmother's body, her hands in the posture of prayer. Valerie stands apart, frowning, staring in the direction of the group of men. There is something unsettling about her gaze. Her eyebrows join together in a thick and dark line, casting a shadow over her kohl-smudged eyes. Anarka raises her head to make eye contact with Priya, who smiles back.

Look what happened a few months ago, the man bellows. The trains were cancelled. Those ungrateful workers set fire to the fields and disrupted production. Then there are those four who dared write to the Director of the Labour Department to ask for compensation. After everything that's given to them free: housing, food, medicine, and they protest, kan nou nou travay kouma bef, when we work like bulls in the fields. Their action casts a bad image over those who respect the law.

The colonial law, you mean? the neighbour says.

The British police are here to protect us, the man replies.

Protect? We are all expendable, the neighbour snorts. Sone walo jaag chalo. Those who are asleep need to wake up. My wife says she won't feed any walking dead bodies.

She's pushing it. Bour li do. Fuck her, the man croaks in a fit of laughter. He lowers his voice but continues. Angry women are like children having a tantrum. Ignore her when

she wails and slap her for not cooking properly. Wear the trousers for God's sake!

Anarka's ears feel warm. She pinches them and rests her elbows on her lap. An older woman glares at the man and admonishes him to mind his language. He slides out as stealthily as he entered the conversation, shakes hands with some of the men and leaves, the way an important man moves out of a room. Anarka's head is buzzing. Before she can make sense of it all, Priya strides towards her, leaving her mother and Valerie, who join the women sitting around the body.

Priya motions her outside and pulls her to sit down on the front steps by the pile of slippers. Her grandfather frowns as she follows her friend whose grey eyes sparkle as the sunlight hits them. Priya wears a black tikka, a perfectly painted dot at the top of her nose, between her eyebrows. She is as dainty in her fuchsia and emerald churidar as Anarka is plain in her passed-down, knee-length brown corduroy skirt and cheesecloth blouse.

You ok? Priya asks, and as she pulls her knees to her chest, two plaits fall each side of her round belly.

You are the first one to ask. Anarka's voice comes out hoarse and brittle. Koumsi koumsa; it is sinking in.

Ma says it was unexpected.

Her absence is. Anarka has been pushed around all day, and she does not know in which bed she will sleep tonight. Her grandmother seemed well yesterday, but maybe she was not paying enough attention?

Do you want us to make garlands with the gulaiti flowers or what you call frangipani? Priya is as cheerful as ever. Or you could come to see my rabbit, the one my father got me. Anarka then realises that the man who just left is Priya's father. She does not respond to Priya's invitations but blurts out what is bothering her.

AppaAya has not had a minute for me today.

They sit in silence and stare out at the front yard, the

small square of bare and packed-down earth parched by the rebellious roots of the umbrella-shaped badamie. A neat pile of leaves and almond pods sit in the shadows of its trunk.

There is a small commotion in the street, and they watch Valerie walk out towards her aunt and a tanned man, his skin stretched tight over a skeletal face. TonLaboutik, Uncle Shopkeeper, the nickname the children gave the marsan anbulan, the mobile seller who holds a bicycle which has a brightly-coloured aura from the tower of objects securely fastened to it – a mound of pots, pans, plates and cups in stainless steel, wooden brooms, rough raffia baskets, fabric flowers, and pink religious idols.

Valerie and her aunt are deep in conversation with the man. Their body language – swift arm movements, vigorous nods, after seconds of stillness – speaks for itself. Partou zot pe organize. On every estate, workers are organising. They hear the man share news from the North – Trou Aux Biches to Pamplemousses, Espérance Trébuchet and Cottage – to the capital city, from where he had travelled in the early hours. In Port Louis, it's business as usual despite the few cargo ships reaching the port.

TonLaboutik turns to AppaAya and points to his bike. I got new pressure cookers from India, spades from China, and a new vegetarian cheese from Australia. To papa kimanier? he asks. How is your father? Your mother was a regular customer of mine. Sorry for your loss, my child, and for your father's.

Child? Anarka's aunt snorts. You can't mean me, a fully grown woman! My father is fine.

TonLaboutik informs her that he has the pil Rayovak Anarka's grandfather has ordered. He will be pleased with these batteries. Tell him to change the old ones before they leak and damage the inside of the radio set. He can update us with the war news then.

TonLaboutik rings his bell, dringdring, dringdring, and summons the neighbours, who flock out of their homes,

surround him and call out their questions. Ki nouvel depi Poudre D'Or? Did you deliver the medicinal herbs to Mami Rada? Has Madame Virahsawmy sent the wedding invites? Where will the next protest be held?

Parsel pou to mama. He then hands a package to Valerie who unwraps it and pulls out a brightly coloured pair of kolatam batons. She lovingly touches the smooth Indian hardwood, rounded at the ends and decorated with fuchsia and turquoise patterns. She smells them and seems to be on a cloud.

When Anarka looks at the two sisters closely, she notices the difference between them. Priya is delicate, Valerie more athletic, in a cream kameez worn like a boy's kurta and a violet ohrni wrapped around her neck covering her lips and nose in the style of a military scarf. The heavy bun at the top of her head adds to the determined look that Priya does not have. Priya has a milky pale complexion, while the freckles on Valerie's nose accentuate her matt copper skin tone.

Priya reads Anarka's mind and tells her that one day Valerie dreams of freeing the people, the next she wants to kill every breathing thing. She is still seeing Moon, which my father does not know. Some days Ma tells Valerie that there is no space for love in the colony, that she will lose herself or him, and that they will be ripped apart. On other days, Ma tells her to follow her heart, that she should trust her instincts.

Priya feels divided between her sister and her mother. Anarka understands this. Confrontation scares her too. Valerie is driven by it.

Priya puts her arm around Anarka's shoulders and pulls her to join other children in their noisy race around the house. Anarka hesitates but Priya insists. Anarka follows her friend and the boys, and they dart in the front entrance, zigzag through the living room and zoom out of the kitchen door. Anarka stops after the first round, sits on the steps and observes Valerie who is leaning against the smooth trunk of

the badamie, her legs apart, her arms crossed over her chest. Valerie seems fearless, almost haughty. No wonder her aunt gets along with her. Priya runs across to her, panting and laughing, as her mother comes out of the house and calls her daughters. It is time to leave.

Maybe you can ask your aunt if you can come with me to DadiDjinni? Priya reminds Anarka that she has never been to ‘the storyteller of the rocks’, the title given to the most ancient woman in the hamlet who recounts stories of the land while she squats on a boulder outside her hut. DadiDjinni lives only a few streets from her, but Anarka has never ventured further than the road in front of the house. Her grandmother would have fumed. Anarka was not to mix with *anyone*.

You should also come for a sleepover; your aunt won’t mind, Priya says, before crossing the yard and joining her mother. Valerie follows them nonchalantly.

Anarka watches them disappear behind the short wall at the end of the front garden and wishes her friend could stay longer. She then enters the house buzzing with people and searches for her aunt. Her uncles are organising an improvised kitchen in the backyard to cook after the servis, the prayers that will be held the next day. She follows a tall woman carrying a tray of spices to find AppaAya in front of a wide karay on a blazing fire. She is dropping piles of onions, tomatoes, garlic, ginger, and chillies into bubbling oil. Anarka sits next to her, but AppaAya does not seem to notice. A neighbour is chopping bitter gourd in long stripes and mixing them in a thick mustard paste. They are preparing meals her grandmother enjoyed in her lifetime – rougay touni, margoz masala and spicy rason – a ritual for guests to share the departed’s favourite meals after the funeral. These are not lavish dishes, AppaAya tells the neighbour, compared to those prepared when her eldest uncle passed away. After catering for men, children, grandchildren, extended families and guests, women have

no time to indulge their own tastes. At least my father has promised to serve rum, she says and the two women laugh. Anarka recalls how her grandmother often said that a shot of brown heat made life bearable on this island of exile.

Anarka leaves the women and moves along the dark corridor to her grandmother's room. No lamp has been lit on this side of the house. She feels her way to the bed and curls up in the musty smell of the old woman's mattress, spread with old saris, removed from the wardrobe, never to be worn again. Anarka pulls her legs to her chest and falls into a light sleep disturbed by the cacophony around her. She keeps waking from dreams about falling, thinking she is screaming, but hearing no sound. It is time to work out what to discard of the day and how to move forward from it, as her grandfather would say.