

A Crate Full of Mangoes - 11 Stories

Written for the exhibition - A Crate Full of Mangoes

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[...] exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India's of the mind.

Excerpt from *Imaginary Homelands* - Salman Rushdie

If you don't think about something for long enough, you think it's forgotten... until you begin to remember. These stories are foremost acts of remembrance. They are my way 'to reclaim the thing that was lost'. They all relate in some way to my real and imaginary India: the country I was born in and emigrated from. The country I remember and forget.

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1. Sentiment and Nostalgia

In Fryerstown, Australia, while walking his beloved dog in the bush, the Anglo-Indian turns toward an almighty crashing sound. A eucalyptus branch lies shattered behind him on the bush track. Shuddering, he closes his eyes. Thoughts of weight, history, and his mortality enter his mind. It was a close call. That branch could have killed him. Unconsciously, he crouches to the ground as if gravity provides no other option. Opening his eyes, he stares at the fallen limb. Scanning the detritus, he picks up a stick from a mistletoe once attached parasitically to the eucalyptus, mimicking its appearance. It now lies detached from its host among the broken debris.

The Anglo-Indian stares at the mistletoe, sensing an invisible bond between it and himself. He uses it to draw small circles in the dust repetitively. Mimicking the way his mother mixed *atta* with her hand when making chapatis. He found this action soothing. Recalling India, often with sentiment and nostalgia, had become a recurring theme recently. Randomly he remembers the sound of crows from the flat in Colaba (so different from the melodic song of magpies in Fryerstown), the Gateway of India, the heat, and the light. It would be misleading to suggest there existed narratives in these recollections for anyone else. Others may simply see a montage of close and distant images in and out of focus – tetrapods, the sea, interiors – as just that, a collection of forms representing nothing more than what they are. But he knew intimately that stories lived in these pictures. And that there were connections that

traced narratives, which he never really talked about. Who would he talk to about this stuff from his past anyway? Now though, these thoughts and images were becoming more important in his life.

He left India when he was six years old. His parent's choice. He loved his home in the Australian bush. He knew India wasn't his home anymore. He thought he had accepted this. However, there was still a strong longing in his heart which confused him. Something had been left behind.

It is impossible to imagine what the six-year-old was thinking, as the taxi pulled away from Colaba. He was leaving friends, the moist heat of Bombay, and the view from the balcony flat where he sat for hours, singing about things he saw. He didn't know Australia, where it was or what the views would be. Would he be able to see the sea and feel a moist breeze as he could on the balcony in Colaba? As he looked out of the rear window of the taxi on the 25th day of January in 1970, that last day in India, he didn't cry. Even though everyone else did. How could he know what emigrating meant? Or what citizenship meant? He didn't know what 'forever' meant, when he asked his mother how long they were going to Australia for. Time didn't stretch that far into the future for a six-year-old to comprehend. There was only this strange sense that he wasn't comprehending something. Something profound. Leaving India didn't seem to matter that much, then. It was mattering more now. Then, India was only a small space, Bombay/Colaba/303 Pushpa Bhavan. The rest of India was alien. Not a part of him. He could not formulate any

questions, then. He did not need any answers then either. Even now, he is unsure what were the right questions to ask. Besides, what could he do with the answers? He wasn't prepared for the profound loss leaving his place of birth would have. His parents couldn't have known either. They chose to leave India to give their children a better life. An extraordinary sacrifice on their part.

He sits on the red, dusty track. Reflecting on his history was making his body feel heavy. Simultaneously, the dry atmosphere was sucking all the moisture from his skin, making him feel lightheaded. Embracing the fuzziness of remembering and forgetting, he decides to keep the stick as a memento or marker of this moment. Not knowing what else to do with it, he would take it to his studio. It could potentially become an artwork which might help him understand. He didn't know what to do with the complexity of time, place, and space. He needed to give this equation form; a form that would help him make sense of all of this. It was form that would gradually get him closer to his own acceptance of things. It wasn't that he only wanted the clarity of knowing where he belonged. But the assurance that comes with belonging. His Anglo-Indian community never had a place, a land which they felt they belonged on. As an option, McCluskiegunge was a failed utopia for the community.

He stands and walks slowly with his dog to the field further down the track. His white dhoti and kurta standing out starkly against his dark skin and dusty, brown, dreamy light. He feels liberated wearing this Indian costume. A

dhoti and kurta aren't what he would normally wear in public. He feels he hasn't the right to wear such a costume. But in his own solitude, he finds the garment loose and relaxing. It makes him feel surer of himself. It reminds him he is Indian, while everything around him makes him forget this. Migration and assimilation strategies to adjust and 'fit into Australia culture' seem to make being Indian harder. Dress codes, he thought, were a way he to make him feel authentic. He was becoming aware that living in a white world was making him feel white.

He enters the field where his dogs love to run. Walking, meandering, daydreaming, and generally wasting time, seemed to take on importance these days. He liked the slowness of rural living, and the intimacy that small towns provide.

He lies on the bleached grass, closes his eyes, and dreams about living and dying and the space between Fryerstown, Australia and Colaba, India. He feels like the character in Jeff Wall's photograph, 'Citizen' (1996) ... asleep on the fringe of belonging and unbelonging.

He could feel the contradictory sensation of rising and falling simultaneously. Rising to the celestial stars, while sinking deep into the earth. Lying on this land in Djarra country he was able to dream of Bombay as seven islands before land reclamation. And India and Australia before colonisation.

Is this what it means to be of mixed race he wondered? Not a division on racial lines. Not half souls belonging

to two cultures. But rather, as another interpretation of Homi Bhabha's 'doubling' experience, one which is expansive and inclusive, connecting, rather than separating, us to each other and to place.

2. The Flat

The flat I lived in for the first six years of my life was in India. 303 Pushpa Bhavan, Colaba, opposite Telephone Bhavan, Bombay. It would be 15 years before I would return to India after my parents made the decision to emigrate. On this first trip back to my place of birth I would stay in this flat which was now half to a third of its size when we lived there. It was now owned by my aunt, my mother's younger sister. All this is a story for another time.

The first time I walked back into the flat it seemed so much smaller than when I remembered it. I was much bigger physically now than when I lived there as a child. What I wasn't prepared for was how important this experience would be for me. The flat held so many memories and stories. I felt connected to the space. It was palpable. I didn't expect or notice this immediately. But I would make many trips back to India. And each time I would feel the need to return and stay in this flat. It's large, heavy, wooden front door. It's cold travertine floors and thick concrete walls. The balcony, I recall was my sanctuary. It opened onto the street from where, if I leaned to the left, I could see and smell the sea which was at the end of the street. Only 500 or so meters away.

Each time I returned to the flat, I looked for traces, parts left somewhere, on the door handles, on the floor, in the air. My DNA was present in the flat. I now understood Bachelard's ideas of poetry and space. I could feel the Frenchman's thesis in my heart.

3. The Floor Cleaner

Early each morning, an old man would come to the flat to clean the floors. No Dyson. Just a broom made from reeds to sweep, and water and rags to mop and dry the floors. Like most domestic helpers in India, he most likely lived in a village quite a distance from the overpopulated city of Bombay. Invariably he would be gone before I woke.

One day I met him while he was enjoying a glass of cold homogenised milk. Part of the routine my aunt had established with him. I suspect she thought the calcium in the milk would help strengthen his weary bones. He seemed too old to be doing this job. But his choices were significantly limited, I suspect. Whatever his wages were for doing this work would go a long way to supporting his family back in his village. I greeted him (in English) courteously. He smiled caringly with his pale grey eyes. Cataracts probably gave them this cloudy colour. His gaze was warm and enveloping. Unexpectedly, I seemed mesmerised when caught in his gaze. We had no common language to communicate. Language seemed unnecessary. He turned to my aunt and in a quiet, gentle voice (in Marathi most likely) asked if I was the *babu* who lived in this flat many years ago. He remembered me. I would learn from my aunt who translated that he used to clean these floors when my family lived in the flat. And that he would bring his son who was the same age as me and we would play together while he worked. I could not remember this. But he could.

At that moment I would have done anything to have remembered him and his son. Milan Kundera's equations, around slowness and speed and remembering and forgetting, filled my head. Is this what migrants feel if they return to their homeland? I wondered about the cleaner's son. What would we say to each other if we met today?

That afternoon I lay on the cold, clean floor and thought about these two people. Father and son, I once knew. I was left wondering and daydreaming.

4. A Crate Full of Mangoes

My mum, when we lived in India, worked for a shipping company – Mackinnon Mackenzie & Co., Ltd. The company still exists in Bombay, I learnt, having recently googled them. The firm has ‘deep roots in maritime history, with connections to the British India Steam Navigation Company founded in 1862’. In the case of India, trade preceded colonisation, with the East India company establishing its authority in India before it was formally superseded by the British crown. It was initially trade which gave rise to the Anglo-Indian community through miscegenation.

As with so many Anglo-Indian women of the era, my mum was a stenographer and personal secretary to one of the senior managers at the company. I remember going to visit her at her place of work. The top floor of the company seemed to be set up as a social space for senior executives to enjoy. This is where I remember waiting for my mum on one occasion.

But in the context of this story, this isn’t my enduring memory. It’s a crate full of mangoes I remember. *Mangifera indica*. The Alphonso mango – the king of mangoes, grown right here in India along the Malabar coast and exported around the world.

There are various theories as to how Alphonso mangoes acquired their name. The most prevalent claims that the fruits are named after Afonso de Albuquerque, the Portuguese viceroy and general who established a colony in Goa in 1510. While this view is widely held, most experts

believe the most likely explanation connects the name of this variety of mango to Jesuit missionary Nicolau Alfonso, a horticulturist who grafted mangoes in India in the mid-16th century. Jesuit missionaries implemented grafting techniques to develop new varieties and traditionally named the new fruits after themselves, political leaders, or other Portuguese identities. The final theory hypothesises that Jesuit missionaries may have named the variety after Jesuit Saint Alphonso Rodriguez of Spain.

Personally, the references to Goa and Portugal are important. It connects with my surname, D'Costa, meaning 'off the coast'. My paternal grandfather was born in Lisbon, Portugal, and orphaned in India as a child. I remembered when I visited Portugal, I immediately felt a deep connection to place. I remember all the men looking like my dad. It was uncanny. And everyone would speak to me in Portuguese. And would be surprised that I didn't speak the language. Because of my name and appearance, they just assumed I was Portuguese.

The crate of mangoes was a gift to my mum from her boss, probably from one of their cargo clients. The crate arrived at our flat. It was taller than me. I remember I had to be on tippy toes to look into the crate. Each mango was carefully nestled into its own straw wrapping. Its form, colour, and smell were perfect. Unlike the mangoes from Colaba market in mango season, there was not a blemish on any of the mangoes. Each was a brilliant saffron colour. These mangoes were undoubtedly export quality.

Alphonso mangoes emit a fragrant aroma when ripe, said to be musky, floral, and sweet. Ironically, I don't recall eating one. But I didn't have to. I think what seemed so impressive, beside their formal perfection, was that there were so many, and they were all for us. It seemed so excessive and well beyond what we would normally have access to in terms of quality and quantity. It sat next to the refrigerator and seemed to me a beacon of something very, very special. Opulent.

Shipping and 'special' food treats seemed to be a recurring narrative in my life. The next time I would feel this way was when my dad left for Australia, exactly one year before us, to get settled before my mum arrived with my two brothers and myself. Before he departed, he left a very large tin box of 'Quality Street' chocolates for us to enjoy. Each time we had one we could think of our dad. When I was small and thought of my dad it was his hands I remember. Maybe it's because when his arms were relaxed his hands were at my eye level. Specifically, it was the deep grooves in some of his fingers. Years later I would realise these grooves were a result of playing the double bass. It was running his fingers across the thick strings which caused these callused grooves.

It was a long time before I could buy a box of these chocolates or buy a mango to eat. I didn't feel as if I could consume these two foods as a daily staple. It's strange how to this day each time I eat a mango it has a very special meaning. And even though it is an Australian Kensington Pride mango I am consuming, I am transported

back in time simultaneously to Colaba, to the Malabar Coast,
and to Portugal.

5. Holi

Holi is an ancient Hindu festival often referred to as the Festival of Colour. It marks the arrival of Spring in India and the triumph of good over evil. It involves throwing vibrant powders (*gulal*) at each other. Or mixing the coloured dyes with water and spraying it. The festival is supposed to foster social unity, encouraging people to gather, share, and celebrate joyously. As a child, the festival seemed riotous and a little scary.

I remember my mum would dress her three boys in perfect white kurtas on the day. My two brothers would go off into the streets to participate in the festive activities. They would return home at intervals, covered in coloured dyes that stood out markedly against the whiteness of the kurtas. I stayed at home, my choice, watching in fear and excitement from the balcony. By chance, each time I returned to India it coincided with Holi. I remember that, during the week leading up to Holi, the local market in Colaba, which was just around the corner from our flat, would have wooden carts laden with coloured dyes. Each expertly fashioned into spectacular pyramids of intense colours.

These early images from Holi stayed with me. When I commenced art school, I was terrified I had nothing to say. We were given a project to make a body of paintings around a childhood memory. Relying on memory and imagination, I choose to focus on Holi. I made large abstract paintings full of expressive gestural marks, strange forms that vaguely resembling plants, and exotic colour combinations

which I layered intuitively. Making these paintings felt like magic. I had so little experience making paintings. There was no planning or preparatory drawing, with little idea of how to begin and when the painting was complete. I had no academic language to talk about the work in terms of form and content. Just naïve enthusiasm and bounds of energy. But these early artworks taught me so much about painting. Formally, technically, and conceptually. These early paintings set the foundation of what I would make art about. With India central to my deliberations.

Anish Kapoor, I would find out much later, when he was at art school would also be encouraged to confront his Indian heritage. You can see evidence of this in his seminal early work, *1000 Names* (1979-1980), where forms and coloured pigments refer to India in multiple ways.

Holi festival holds great importance for my art practice. It allowed me to think about colour as culture. It helped point me in the direction of my Indian culture and heritage. Something I was losing touch with without even knowing.

6. *The Balcony*

The balcony of our flat in Colaba faced the main street. It was a large double balcony, opened from the living area and from the adjoining bedroom. We would run in a loop from the living area, along the balcony, through the bedroom, kitchen, dining area, and back to the living area. This balcony was important as the demarcation between inside and out. I would often sit there as a child, singing about everything that came into view. There was no logical narrative, hierarchy, or criterion for what I sang about. Everything that came into my view became part of the song. At an early age, this is how I chose to partake in the world, preferring the safety and separation that the balcony provided. It felt safe. I stayed apart, preferring to observe. Looking, I can say now, was important, although I did not know that then. I was both a part and apart from Bombay and India.

Academic Bill Ashcroft, in discussing David Malouf's novel, *12 Edmonstone Street* (1985), links the importance of 'verandahs' [balconies] to the developing consciousness:

Verandahs are no-man's-land, border zones that keep contact with the house and its activities on one face but are open on the other to the street, the night and all the vast, unknown areas beyond (Malouf).¹

¹ Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2014), 193-94.

It is the double orientation of the verandah/balcony, which is of interest and relevance for the Anglo-Indian who shares this bi-focal vision and this border space. The colonial verandah, like the cantonment, the barracks, and the garden, was a liminal space during colonial times. For the British in India during the colonial period, it provided a space of reprieve from the heat, dust, and germs ... from Indians and from India itself. It was a space of hierarchy and privilege that the British could leave and enter as they pleased. It was a socially controlling space, which as academic Alan Johnson notes, '[...] enforced the domestic social code that dictated how and where visitors could be received'.²

So even at the age of six, unconsciously, I was already separating myself from my place of birth. The Anglo-Indian was already acting out his form of separateness and spatialised developing identity. The verandah/balcony in this context becomes the conceptualised space of the Anglo-Indian, sitting between the order of British privilege and the chaos of India outside.

Johnson describes the indispensability of the verandah as:

[...] a space of European leisure in a hot climate; as a threshold where goods from the bazaar are brought to be sold to the English memsahib so she can be safe from marketplace pollution; and as a zone situated between

² Alan Johnson, *Out of Bounds: Anglo-Indian Literature and the Geography of Displacement* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 184.

English and Indian spheres of life – in short, a liminal space that combines, but never completely adulterates, the two spheres (a combination that approximates the Anglo-Indian's liminal identity).³

As a child, I physically distanced myself from the city of my birth, preferring to sit on the liminal space of the balcony ... watching and witnessing the city but not partaking. Just singing.

³Johnson, *Out of Bounds*, 183.

7. *'Johnny'*

A true story! A few days after I was born my mother received a proposition to sell me to a very wealthy Indian family who desperately wanted a son. Obviously, she didn't accept the offer.

I was born in a small private hospital on Marine Parade in Bombay. Marine Parade is sometimes referred to as the 'Queen's Necklace' because of the three-kilometre semi-circle of streetlights which surrounds Back Bay in Bombay. It is a favourite place for people to promenade on evenings to catch the sea breeze. And for young couples to spend time together. Marine Parade is often featured on postcards. In fact, years later when I was commencing my PhD and researching my relationship to Bombay, my mum would send me a postcard while she was in India visiting her sister, marking an X on the image to show me where I was born. I would eventually attempt to recapture the same image as the postcard in my own photograph.

After I was born, on a daily basis my mum's room would be filled with beautiful flowers. She was also brought delicious meals each day. The nurses on duty were distributing an overflow of food and flowers from the rich family whose son's wife was in the hospital. On one occasion, a few days after my mum had given birth, she could hear tremendous crying and wailing coming from an adjacent room. Assuming that a mother may have tragically lost her child at birth, mum made enquires with the nurse on duty, only to be told that the crying was because the

mother from the rich family had a baby girl. The family wanted a boy. That was what the crying was about. Males were obviously valued more to carry the family's name.

One day my mum casually met the mother-in-law matriarch from the rich family at the hospital. The mother-in-law on seeing me mistakenly said to my mum, 'you too had a baby girl.' Apparently, I was a very 'pretty baby' and was often mistaken for a girl. When my mum corrected her, she was shocked to hear that I was a boy. The next day she came with her son to see my mum and more specifically me. That week he came every day and would play with me for hours, obviously not showing the same demonstrable affection toward his own daughter. He nicknamed me '*Johnny*'. He became infatuated with me. I was a happy laughing, smiling child who clearly loved the additional attention. On one occasion while I was whisked off on a play date, the son's mother, on finding out that this was my mum's third son (no daughters), said to her that she should have married her son. And if she did and bore him three sons, they would 'worship the ground she walked on'! It was on this same day that she would make my mum the offer to buy me for a significant, life-changing amount of money. Adding that my mum could maintain contact with me and be acknowledged as an 'aunt' but could never let me know the truth about my parentage. It was guaranteed that I would have everything I ever desired. Apparently, this family owned a significant amount of real estate on Marine Parade. Wasn't she a little tempted, I would ask the first time my mum shared this story with me. My brothers chipping in that she should have taken the offer. My mum said 'no'.

It never entered her mind to say 'yes'. I sometimes wonder how different all our lives would have been if she agreed to the outrageous proposition.

8. Somersault

The artwork, *Somersault* (2013), draws on the memory of an experience in India during my childhood. At the age of five, I had my first encounter with prejudice and racial difference because I could not do a somersault. What I suspected, without being able to articulate it at the time, was that the gravity of the experience was never about being able to do a somersault. I would not have known the terms 'racism' or 'prejudice' then. The school I attended was mono-racial. We were all ostensibly Indians; our differences were based on religious beliefs and language.

My inability to do a somersault was an experience that stayed with me and which I (re)performed forty-five years later in a dance hall in Central Victoria, Australia. This failure, which had caused me so much trauma as a child, was re-staged using tropes from the original experience, recoded with attitudinal shifts that allow for humour and the absurd to operate as counterpoint to the seriousness of not being accepted by my Indian peers.

In re-staging the event (remembered across forty-five years) accuracy fails, as does the protagonist who really cannot do a somersault. On closer inspection, the ribbons he wears with pride on his shirt are not for gymnastics but athletics. Their very authenticity remains open to being challenged.

The gestures he re-performs, from poses he has seen and those linked to real gymnastics, are juxtaposed with poses that are amateurish, awkward, and that attract

humorous responses from viewers. He is too tall, overweight, and the wrong shape for a gymnast. Perhaps the young boys in India were right to laugh if these present photos are indicative of his gymnastic prowess.

Today I still wonder why they laughed at me. What was so different about me that they could see? Was it race, was it language, was it my sexual orientation (which I wasn't even aware of at that age), or was it simply that I could not do a somersault? Being different, I was beginning to see, would potentially be a problem.

9. Stars

In 1989 I left Delhi as it was getting dark, around 6 pm. After climbing on top of the bus to secure my backpack, I boarded the deluxe AC bus destined for Manali in the Kulu Valley. I chose Manali because I wanted to see the Himalayan Mountain range. It was an arduous 14-hour overnight trip, covering some 570 kilometres along steep, winding dirt roads with scary hairpin bends. I was the only tourist on the bus. The other passengers looked like locals returning home. Unlike most of my prior experiences of train and bus transport in India, I had the luxury of an empty seat next to me. It didn't help. Sleep was impossible due to trepidation and excitement.

I arrived in Manali at dawn. I didn't have to worry about when and where to disembark as Manali was where the bus terminated. I had no idea what to expect. I didn't have to go looking for mountain ranges. The Kulu Valley is nestled snugly, surrounded by snow-capped peaks. The air felt so clean, icy, crisp, and clear. It was cold in ways that were invigorating and elemental. Later that day a thunderstorm rolled in as if organised to herald my arrival. It was like no other thunderstorm I had previously experienced. The sound of each thunderclap was so loud not only did you hear it but felt it through your body, as it ricocheted across the mountain range repeatedly, eventually fading away before the next one arrived. It was mesmerising. Reminding me of the power of nature which made me happy.

That evening I walked into town for an early dinner. By the time I finished darkness had quickly descended. With no visible streetlights and torch in hand, I made my way back to my hotel. A short walk along a dirt path, through an apple orchard before arriving at my destination. At the apple orchard, once I was confident of my location, I turned my torch off. Looking up at the night sky, I ducked. Above me, so close I felt it was falling on me, was a clear, vast, blackened sky full of stars. I laughed quietly at the silliness of my gesture, but also because at that moment I felt nothing could be more beautiful and perfect. I knew I would remember this moment forever, aware that I most likely would not see or experience the Kulu Valley again.

That night in bed, enveloped by the warmth of my coverings and cradled in this beautiful valley by a sacred mountain range and a domed, starry sky, I thought of Anselm Kiefer's beautiful and haunting watercolour, *Everyone Stands Under His Own Dome of Heaven* (1970). I slept deeply, assured by my own happiness.

In 1999, my partner and I bought a house in Fryerstown, Central Victoria, in the Goldfields National Park. Beautiful Dja Dja Wurrung country. Each weekend we would drive from Flemington in Melbourne to what felt like our newfound sanctuary. We felt blessed.

On a perfectly still, crisp, cold, clear night, with no ambient streetlights around, I looked up at the sky to see the Milky Way in its full glory. I was starstruck, literally. Exhilarated in a way that I cannot describe. I was immediately transported across time and space back to

the orchard in the Kulu Valley. This same experience with stars across vast, open skies, uninhibited by geographic and political boundaries, spelt out clearly that my heart would always belong in two places, India and Australia.

10. Gold

Fact: Almost 11% of the total gold above ground worldwide is held by Indian households and women collectively. This amounts to a massive 24,000 tonnes of gold.

Women in India traditionally invest their money in stainless steel cooking utensils as they are utilitarian, and because they have a resale value if they need cash. Or when they can afford to, invest in gold jewellery.

Fact: The Victorian Gold Rush was one of the largest and most rapid mass migrations in modern history. From 1851 to 1861 Victoria's population escalated from approximately 77,000 people to over 500,000.

My mum, an Anglo-Indian woman, had beautiful gold bangles which she loved. On her last trip to India, she had her gold bangles melted down and made into name bracelets for her three sons. When she returned, we were each given our name bracelet. When she told me what she had done I was shocked, sad, and disappointed. I don't know why she did this. It was obviously an act of love. But these bangles meant so much to her. And because they meant so much to her, they meant the same to me. I know how much pleasure they brought her, and I know I loved it when she wore them. I have never worn my name bracelet.

In 2002, British artist Cornelia Parker created an artwork titled *Engagement Ring Drawing (As Long as it Lasted)*. She took her own gold engagement ring, had a professional wire-drawer stretch it into a single,

continuous, hair-thin thread, and used it to draw on a sheet of paper. This and similar earlier works she made remain some of my favourite artworks.

In 2010, while visiting the Guggenheim Museum in New York, I encountered an exhibition by two extraordinary artists. Through a shared respect for each other's work, they would form a close kinship. *Paired, Gold: Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Roni Horn*, the exhibition curated by Nancy Spector, brought together "*Untitled*" (*Golden*) (1995), a shimmering gold-beaded curtain by Torres, with Roni Horn's *Gold Field* (1980-82). On entering the large space, you could read correspondence between the two artists - letters written to each other after a chance meeting. Immediately, the exhibition draws you into the poetic and personal and holds you in this magical space. Next, you move through Torres' golden curtain where you see Horn's material sheet of pure gold lying on the floor. Simple, direct, and transformative. I was the only person in the space to view this work. I lay on the floor to catch the flickering light and surface of Horn's gold square. Mesmerised by the power of what art has the capacity to do, this exhibition set a benchmark, in the way it can speak to viewers in such beautiful, complex, and sublime ways.

In 2015 I covered the soles of a pair of Rajasthani slippers I owned with gold leaf. I would wear these slippers and walk the streets of India depositing small particles of gold while simultaneously picking up the fragmented detritus of the street which I would bring back to

Australia. Through this simple performative act, I wanted to create a material dialogue between places, using gold as physical and poetic form.

11. Left Behind

You left me behind when you left India for Australia. I waited to see if you would ever realise this. I wondered if you would ever return. If you would come, looking for me. If you had any questions which needed answers.

I didn't know leaving India would mean leaving you. I thought we took everything we could when we left. I didn't check to see if anything was left behind. I didn't know we could be separated. It would take a long time for me to figure this out. And 'figuring it out' has been incremental. I couldn't articulate questions, let alone find any answers. It was just a 'soft ache' which sat with me for years.

Now I can see this 'search for something', had started without me being conscious of it. I made an experimental super 8 film when I was completing the final year of my undergraduate art degree. I remember using the Talking Heads song, *This Must Be the Place (Naïve Melody)*, as a soundtrack for the film. It was the lyrics which struck a chord with me.

Home is where I want to be
Pick me up and turn me round
I feel numb, born with a weak heart
I guess I must be having fun

The less we say about it the better
Make it up as we go along
Feet on the ground, head in the sky
It's okay, I know nothing's wrong, nothing

Hi yo, I got plenty of time
Hi yo, you got light in your eyes
And you're standing here beside me
I love the passing of time

Never for money, always for love
Cover us and say goodnight
Say goodnight

[Songwriters: David Byrne / Tina Weymouth / Jerry Harrison / Chris Frantz
(1983)]

Making this film and using the lyrics to this song pointed me in the direction of India. I started to feel a strong desire to re-visit India when I turned twenty-one. Prior to this I hadn't given it much thought. India was something in my past. Not my present. Except when I started making art, India was the place I would turn to for source material.

I suspected something was not quite right the first time I returned to India and stayed in the flat. I hadn't thought about the flat or you prior to this. This visit to India changed something in me. It had been fifteen years since I left India and the flat. It hadn't occurred to me that I had left you behind. But when I entered the flat I could 'feel' you were there. I know now you were the reason for this 'soft ache' I was carrying for all these years.