




blossom

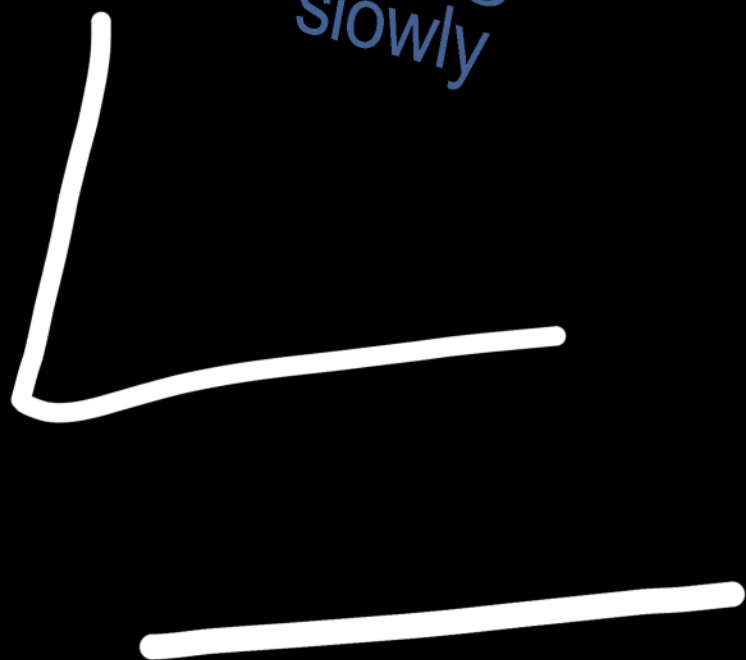
m.b.

Blindsided

(read it down the fingers,
across the palm,
around the flower)


a
a nod can let me in become my
a shy grin bit of her, a tie on my raw neck
new lie that we say to sin but this has
grin hex me yet sew me for
vie
my chocolate, my
wallet, a faucet which
drowns me in your
debt. you sugar
stained fleck.
oh, you opal,
balm of fall.
my autumn
leaf who swims
in the wind
and ebbs
into my lap


oh cobra, blind me
whip-saw, split, me
just me
oh apple, bind me
my july, leave slowly
grieve
don't
me



Number 10

Number 10

Well, I don't remember the first time I met him. I don't even think I was a year old. But the first time I remember meeting my grandfather, he had strikingly orange hair, dyed with henna, and a scruffy beard to match. Strikingly—I use that word sparingly, but this time, I mean it.

He used to play as Mohammedan's striker in the 50s, donning the number 10 on his jersey, the best player in the best club in Bangladesh. Just like his idol, Pele, and later, the great Diego Maradona. My mum used to tell me about how, even before she was born, Nana was billed to be the golden boy. Sure, nothing was the same after the war, but she saw her father as the generational talent he always was. As did I; my grandfather would have won it all. She's never said it out loud, but we've both acknowledged it between our tender recounts of him. Speaking of those recounts, I've got a few.

Maradona had this dribbling trick that Nana loved so much he tried to teach it to me when I was barely six, in a space half the size of the average living room. The Maradona turn. You trap the ball, spin it around a defender, and pirouette away. He must've been in his fifties then, but in that living room, he was a spider, weaving webs around sofa legs and mine alike. Everything that could and couldn't move was at his mercy. We simply watched him dance and glide across the tiled floor. I'd come back to our cottage in Sydney and spend an hour a day

trying to re-enact his routine. But no matter how quick my tiny limbs moved, the wooden furniture never chased me the way it chased him.

He even came to Sydney. I was still too young, but with my dad moving up at work, I'd imagine it was a lot easier to get my grandparents over. Strange, really - he'd lived his whole life in a place where all you needed was Bangla, but he could make it to and from Woolies with ease. *Just like a professional athlete*, I thought. The kind on YouTube, switching between Portuguese and English, like Nana switched between jest and solemnity, between my best friend and my hero. Except none of them sounded quite as cool. His handshakes weren't all there anymore, and though I didn't know it then, something changed in him after a visit to the doctor. He was no less of himself, though. No, in fact, when I was in **my** home with Nana, I felt like I didn't need that time to see my surroundings, so I'd spend a lot more time learning about him. He was impossibly kind, making even my mum seem awful sometimes. See, growing up, I'd always be a bit worried to ask my parents for new toys or some money for the book fair. Hearing them argue at night about it made me realise it wasn't all that important. But I must've committed a sin of apocalyptic proportions when I put that Snickers bar at Woolies. Nana snatched it out of my feeble grasp and took it straight up to the cashier. Man, chocolate really did taste better when your parents weren't in your ear about it. But, that's who he was.

My dad used to take the car to the station for work, so I'd carpool it to school most days. Most days, we'd be late because of me. I spent about 10 minutes

reading Weet-Bix ingredients before pouring myself a bowl of milk. I guess the uncle driving us wasn't in a good mood that one time, and he really harped on that afternoon. By the time I made it to the front door, I was already fiddling with the straps on my bag, distracting myself from the forthcoming breakdown. I learnt that yelling at Nana's grandson was one of the more awful choices that uncle would've made in his life. It didn't help that they both preferred Bangla, because Nana would swallow anyone alive in a verbal tussle. He thundered back indoors, and knelt down the moment he was in a hug's reach. I could feel him shuddering, brimming with wrath.

I shook sometimes as well. I'd shake when I got nervous - more so when yelled at, or when I was out of my depth.

Every time after that - New York, Chittagong, even Dhaka for a wedding - I'd ask Nana to show me tricks with any spherical object that bounced enough. But as high school came around, my mum's phone calls overseas dragged well into the night, and it wasn't so unusual to see her cry. At first, it'd break my heart a little, and I hate that I got used to the sight of it.

By the next time I visited Bangladesh, Nana had grown disgruntled, easily irritable. He spent most of his time watching Bundesliga football. Occasionally, he'd forget my name. But who wouldn't, after years apart? He loved Borussia Dortmund, and so I'd ask him to name their starting XI. As the ball zipped around the TV screen, he'd assign labels. Mats Hummels - centre back, formidable,

good with headers. Marco Reus - attacking midfielder. Eventually, he'd warm up to me again, and we'd talk. But it was suffocating, and I could feel the walls swarm me in that living room. It was ticking me off, and I couldn't make excuses for him like I just did a few sentences ago. *Not even Mum?*, I scoffed.

Somewhere along the way, I just didn't love football the same. Not like sprinting. I was so quick, if I turned around mid-run, my head might've twisted clean off. I'd never felt more narcissistic. So, my passes slowed. I forgot how to time my runs. I wasn't shopping around for new boots in every Math period. I almost got into boxing. I loved watching Muhammad Ali speak. Until I saw those videos of Ali when he was older. He shook too. Nana's hands shook just like his, and I wish I'd noticed it then.

Nana wasn't well.

My mum was more apprehensive than ever, and in a jiff I found myself on a flight back to Chittagong right after I graduated. I know, I grew up pretty quickly, and the ceilings over there aren't exactly high. But the paint on the walls had lost its brilliance, and faded to a pastel shade. The sofas looked different. Even the mosquitos didn't pop in for their usual fiesta. I'd thought it was odd, until I saw Nana. Occasionally, my dad would plead with me to feed him. Maybe it was growing laborious by the day.

Then came the World Cup. I watched Argentina lift the trophy - for only the third time ever. The second time was with Maradona. My uncle took us to watch the streets explode in celebration, while we cheered until our heads felt light. I looked everywhere in that room for Nana. He wasn't there. Must've been put to bed. I didn't think much of it.

Even when I was leaving for Sydney, and the whole family - uncles, aunties, cousins - gathered around him. He looked like a lost child in his wheelchair. Eyes grey and drifting.

Nothing.

I'd given up long ago.

As I was about to hug Nanu, my grandma, and head out the door with my share of the luggage, my baby cousin knocked a rubber football toward me. I looked at it, and trapped it with a couple toes. I glanced up at Nana, and found myself meeting his thoughtless daze for once.

Let's just play passes.

I rolled it with my sole to Nana's feet.

His legs twitched violently. His toes wiggled. He stared at the ball furiously.

I felt my lips separate, as the corners of my mouth vibrated slightly. He passed it back, with a toothless grin and a silent laugh that caused him to shake uncontrollably. Of course he did.

No matter how many times I passed it, he returned it. My own feet began to tremble, and I could feel my hands follow suit too. I couldn't stay standing. I excused myself to another room. Through the cracks between the hallway entrance and the blinds, I watched everyone envelope him, practically roaring in joy.

I looked at the ball, which I'd unconsciously taken with me. I glanced around at the sofas - and in my own moment of clarity, I realised they were completely new. My eyes darted around the room in a nauseous haze. I rolled the ball over with my sole. Took a touch with the inside of my left foot. Rolled it past two, three legs. Chipped it over the coffee table.

Come on, get the ball off me.

The methodical drumming of my feet against the tiles. The dust dancing between my toes. Not a moment of rhythm lost, yet, a touch away from losing it.

You're too slow, kid. Is this all you learnt from me?

I felt my toe graze the underside of the ball, lifting it unintentionally. I mistimed my swing attempting to hold it in the air, smashing my shin into the corner of the table. I reeled over and grabbed it. The warm gush of blood was welcomed pleasantly by the glacial texture of the floor against my skin. I tried to stand again, so I grabbed at every floating piece of wood. The table. The ball. My shirt. Then my face, then my hair, until nothing held me up.

I clawed at the ball, dragging it toward me as I fell once again. I latched onto it as my face met the floor. It was slipping. So smooth, I thought. I scrambled to keep it close, but my fingers just slid across its surface, unable to wedge into any grooves, my nails searching for laces that weren't there. I let it roll from my grip, and I watched it disappear under the sofas. For a moment, I just lay there, listening to the muffled laughter in the other room, the faint buzz of the ceiling fan, the clink of dishes. I closed my eyes, and pressed my forehead against the floor. Breathing in the dust, waiting for the ball to return and ruffle my hair.

Staircase

Staircase

the train hums, gruff,
clenching down on its gums,
calling my bluff, drumming as it comes
i slip between its rusted teeth, sprawling
up the stairs i skip

legs thrown across the seats,
lies spat out like the cardamom mum leaves in the biryani
eyes between yours and the window, darting
nails scraping mud out of my cleats
watching your face in the clouds, parting

down the staircase again
i frown but with this black pen
and i drown in that mattress
an idiot, a clown writing his atlas
of lies, a fox, brown in blood

how far
should i
fall down
tonight