

Museum of Oneself

Where do memories go? I imagine there is a house somewhere with many jars. Some smell of tempered spices—dried chillies, cardamom, bay leaves—their smoky aroma rising in the air; some are oddly damp, like the wet soil under a *tulsi* plant freshly after monsoon rains; others smell of comfort odours that cannot be described but only felt, probably things like sun-dried clothes and dust from a playground, but none have any labels. There are crayon canvases lining the walls in the hallways, scenes from classrooms and kitchens—there is a child in pigtails with her hand raised straight, the excitement of being called upon almost lifting her right from her seat, another child tries to inconspicuously steal a hot fritter from the plate beside his mother, who is still frying them.

There are no bathrooms in this house, no tables or chairs or china, nor any books. Some loose sheets flit by filled with scribbles of half-written poetry and stories of daydreams; there are school-girl notes, a grocery list too, and a page filled with nothing but different designs of the same signature. One room has open cabinets of things: badminton rackets, some broken and others mended too many times; old pencils and watercolours, some of which have mixed into a puddle of brown; small vials of sand and seashells line the shelves; one also has the kidney stones of an age-old surgery. The things in the cabinet of things are labelled; names, dates, and occasions are scribed with locations too. There are baskets with candies, each wrapper labelled with what the candy tastes like—the *panipuri* with your friends, the last mango of the monsoon, the *daal* your mother made—that one is a molten gold-coloured candy—or the pomegranate your grandmother peeled for you. There is a room of sounds too, with records of whirring ceiling fans and crackling spices on simmering gravies, the rustling of a newspaper in your father's hand, and the call of your friends in the evening to come down and play.

Someone or different someones have entered the house at different times. Sometimes in pairs, hands clasped in each other's, excitedly looking at the canvases, the edges dulled with dust. When the people do come, they sit on the floor and wait. They don't mind the gentle but perpetual lap of water on the floor. They look around at a couple of the handwritten notes, most of which are written in glitter pens and have sketches of dresses or faces on the edges, keychains, a paper boat made out of an electric bill, and a wooden Russian doll, which now wobbles a little, all lying there to be touched, to be picked up and held once again. No one stays longer than a few weeks. Once an old man stayed for six months. He lounged in different rooms—sometimes lying lackadaisically, soaking up the sun, sometimes lying face up under the pitter-patter of rain—he read all the notes and rummaged through the cabinet, trying to memorise each name, date, and location. He visited the room of jars only occasionally, he tried to find the familiar breeze of his mother's saree, the whiff of saffron in a cup of morning tea, and the biting smell of green chillis in oil-fried fritters. When he decided to leave the house, he tried to steal several jars and pages. But once outside, he found the jars empty and the pages blank.

The most curious thing about the house was the gentle lapping water on its floor, slowly but surely swallowing the objects in the room. It beckoned and took, first the edge of a paper, but then the ink would separate, and the page turned into mâché; the jars broke, and the water drew out the fragrances it locked, the candies melted, and the records were waterlogged. But the water was not the enemy. It was simply making space for new memories. After all, memories deserve a home more alive than any museum could offer.