SARA SULERI

Sara Suleri (1953–) was born and raised in Pakistan and now teaches English at Yale University. She is the author of both a critical study, The Rhetoric of English India, *and a marvelous memoir in the form of interlocking personal essays,* Meatless Days. *Just as she is the product of two cultures (a Muslim father and a Welsh mother), so her essay writing straddles two worlds, Lahore and New Haven, in two voices—the storyteller who renders her past in juicy, lively detail and the cool, trained analyst of texts and narratives (including her own memories). The themes of displacement and of yearning for a return to "mother's milk" receive her keen, wry scrutiny.*

In a sense, Suleri belongs to the roving, postcolonialist, postmodernist impulse, shared by Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, and others, which is shaking up literature with rambunctious mixings of genres, learned mockeries of political power, and maximalist merger of Western and Third World aesthetics. But she also has the traditional essayist's ability to write classically elegant, compact, conversational, aphoristic prose that keeps reaching for wisdom and balance, with impressive success.

Meatless Days

I HAD STRONGLY HOPED that they would say sweetbreads instead of testicles, but I was wrong. The only reason it had become a question in my mind was Tillat's fault, of course: she had come visiting from Kuwait one summer, arriving in New Haven with her three children, all of them designed to constitute a large surprise. As a surprise it worked wonderfully, leaving me reeling with the shock of generation that attends on infants and all the detail they manage to accrue. But the end of the day would come at last, and when the rhythm of their sleep sat like heavy peace upon a room, then Tillat and I could talk. Our conversations were meals, delectable, but fraught with a sense of prior copyright, because each of us was obliged to talk too much about what the other did not already know. Speaking over and across the separation of our lives, we discovered that there was an internal revenue involved in so much talking, so much listening. One evening my sister suddenly remembered to give me a piece of information that she had been storing up, like a squirrel, through the long desert months of the previous year. Tillat at twenty-seven had arrived at womanhood with comparatively little fuss—or so her aspect says—and her astonishing recall of my mother's face has always seemed to owe more to faithfulness than to the accident of physiognomy. "Sara," said Tillat, her voice deep with the promise of surprise, "do you know what *kapura* are?" I was cooking and a little cross. "Of course I do," I answered with some affront. "They're sweetbreads, and they're cooked with kidneys, and they're very good." Natives should always be natives, exactly what they are, and I felt irked to be so probed around the issue of my own nativity. But Tillat's face was kindly with superior knowledge. "Not sweetbread," she gently said. "They're testicles, that's what *kapura* really are." Of course I refused to believe her, went on cooking, and that was the end of that.

The babies left, and I with a sudden spasm of free time watched that organic issue resurface in my head—something that had once sat quite simply inside its own definition was declaring independence from its name and nature, claiming a perplexity that I did not like. And, too, I needed different ways to be still thinking about Tillat, who had gone as completely as she had arrived, and deserved to be reproached for being such an unreliable informant. So, the next time I was in the taut companionship of

Pakistanis in New York, I made a point of inquiring into the exact status of *kapura* and the physiological location of its secret, first in the animal and then in the meal. Expatriates are adamant, entirely passionate about such matters as the eating habits of the motherland. Accordingly, even though I was made to feel that it was wrong to strip a food of its sauce and put it back into its bodily belonging, I certainly received an unequivocal response: *kapura,* as naked meat, equals a testicle. Better, it is tantamount to a testicle neatly sliced into halves, just as we make no bones about asking the butcher to split chicken breasts in two. "But," and here I rummaged for the sweet realm of nomenclature, "couldn't *kapura* on a lazy occasion also accommodate something like sweetbreads, which is just a nice way of saying that pancreas is not a pleasant word to eat?" No one, however, was interested in this finesse. "Balls, darling, balls," someone drawled, and I knew I had to let go of the subject.

Yet I was shocked. It was my mother, after all, who had told me that sweetbreads are sweetbreads, and if she were wrong on that score, then how many other simple equations had I now to doubt? The second possibility that occurred to me was even more unsettling: maybe my mother knew that sweetbreads are testicles but had cunningly devised a ruse to make me consume as many parts of the world as she could before she set me loose in it. The thought appalled me. It was almost as bad as attempting to imagine what the slippage was that took me from nipple to bottle and away from the great letdown that signifies lactation. What a falling off! How much I must have suffered when so handed over to the shoddy metaphors of Ostermilk and Babyflo. Gosh, I thought, to think that my mother could do that to me. For of course she must have known, in her Welsh way, that sweetbreads could never be simply sweetbreads in Pakistan. It made me stop and hold my head over that curious possibility: what else have I eaten on her behalf?

I mulled over that question for days, since it wantonly refused to disappear after it had been posed: instead, it settled in my head and insisted on being reformulated, with all the tenacity of a query that actually expects to be met with a reply. My only recourse was to make lists, cramped and strictly alphabetical catalogs of all the gastronomic wrongs I could blame on my mother; but somehow by the time I reached *T* and "tripe," I was always interrupted and had to begin again. Finally it began to strike me as a rather unseemly activity for one who had always enjoyed a measure of daughterly propriety, and I decided that the game was not to be played again but discarded like table scraps. For a brief span of time I felt free, until some trivial occasion—a dinner, where chicken had been cleverly cooked to resemble veal—caused me to remind my friends of that obsolete little phrase, "mutton dressed up as lamb," which had been such a favorite of my mother's. Another was "neither flesh nor fowl," and as I

chatted about the curiousness of those phrases, I suddenly realized that my friends had fallen away and my only audience was the question itself, heaving up its head again and examining me with reproach and some scorn. I sensed that it would be unwise to offer another list to this triumphant interlocutor, so I bowed my head and knew what I had to do. In order to submit even the most imperfect answer, I had to go back to where I belonged and—past a thousand different mealtimes—try to reconstruct the parable of the *kapura.*

Tillat was not around to hear me sigh and wonder where I should possibly begin. The breast would be too flagrant and would make me too tongue-tied, so I decided instead to approach the *kapura* in a mildly devious way, by getting at it through its mate. To the best of my knowledge I had never seen *kapura* cooked outside the company of kidney, and so for Tillat's edification alone I tried to begin with the story of the kidney, which I should have remembered long ago, not twenty-five years after its occurrence. We were living in Lahore, in the 9-T Gulberg house, and in those days our cook was Qayuum. He had a son and two daughters with whom we were occasionally allowed to play: his little girl Munni I specially remember because I liked the way her hair curled and because of all the times that she was such a perfect recipient of fake *pan. Pan,* an adult delicacy of betel leaf and nut, can be quite convincingly replicated by a mango leaf stuffed with stones: Ifat, my older sister, would fold such beautifully simulated *pan* triangles that Munni would thrust them into her mouth each time—and then burst into tears. I find it odd today to imagine how that game of guile and trust could have survived even a single repetition, but I recollect it distinctly as a weekly ritual, with us waiting in fascination for Munni to get streetwise, which she never did. Instead, she cried with her mouth wide open and would run off to her mother with little pebbles falling out of her mouth, like someone in a fairy tale.

Those stones get linked to kidneys in my head, as part of the chain through which Munni got the better of me and anticipated the story I really intend to tell. It was an evil day that led her father Qayuum to buy two water buffalo, tethering them at the far end of the garden and making my mother beam at the prospect of such fresh milk. My older brother Shahid liked pets and convinced me that we should beam too, until he and I were handed our first overpowering glasses of buffalo milk. Of milks it is certainly the most oceanic, with archipelagoes and gulf streams of cream emitting a pungent, grassy odor. Trebly strong is that smell at milking-time, which my mother beamingly suggested we attend. She kept away herself, of course, so she never saw the big black cows, with their ominous glassy eyes, as they shifted from foot to foot. Qayuum pulled and pulled at their white udders and, in a festive mood, called up the children one by one to squirt a steaming jet of milk into their mouths. When my turn

came, my mother, not being there, did not see me run as fast as I could away from the cows and the cook, past the vegetable garden and the goldfish pond, down to the farthermost wall, where I lay down in the grass and tried to faint, but couldn't.

I knew the spot from prior humiliations, I admit. It was where I had hidden twice in the week when I was caught eating cauliflower and was made to eat kidney. The cauliflower came first—it emerged as a fragrant little head in the vegetable garden, a bumpy vegetable brain that looked innocent and edible enough to make me a perfect victim when it called. In that era my greatest illicit joy was hastily chawing off the top of each new cauliflower when no one else was looking. The early morning was my favorite time, because then those flowers felt firm and crisp with dew. I would go to the vegetable patch and squat over the cauliflowers as they came out one by one, hold them between my knees, and chew as many craters as I could into their jaunty tightness. Qayuum was crushed. "There is an animal, Begum Sahib," he mourned to my mother, "like a savage in my garden. *Maro! Maro!*" To hear him made me nervous, so the following morning I tried to deflect attention from the cauliflowers by quickly pulling out all the little radishes while they were still pencil-thin: they lay on the soil like a pathetic accumulation of red herrings. That was when Munni caught me. *"Abba Ji!"* she screamed for her father like a train engine. Everybody came running, and for a while my squat felt frozen to the ground as I looked up at an overabundance of astonished adult faces. "What are you doing, Sara *Bibi?*" the driver finally and gently asked. "Smelling the radishes," I said in a baby and desperate defiance, "so that the animal can't find the cauliflower." "Which one?" "The new cauliflower." "Which animal, *bibi ji,* you naughty girl?" "The one that likes to eat the cauliflower that I like to smell." And when they laughed at me, I did not know where to put my face for shame.

They caught me out that week, two times over, because after I had been exposed as the cauliflower despoiler and had to enter a new phase of penitence, Qayuum the cook insisted on making me eat kidney. *"Kirrnee,"* he would call it with a glint in his eye, *"kirrnee."* My mother quite agreed that I should learn such discipline, and the complicated ritual of endurance they imposed did make me teach myself to take a kidney taste without dwelling too long on the peculiarities of kidney texture. I tried to be unsurprised by the mushroom pleats that constitute a kidney's underbelly and by the knot of membrane that holds those kidney folds in place. One day Qayuum insisted that only kidneys could sit on my plate, mimicking legumes and ignoring their thin and bloody juices. Wicked Ifat came into the room and waited till I had started eating; then she intervened. "Sara," said Ifat, her eyes brimming over with wonderful malice, "do you know what kidneys do?" I aged, and my meal regressed, back to its vital belong-

ing in the world of function. "Kidneys make pee, Sara," Ifat told me, "That's what they do, they make pee." And she looked so pleased to be able to tell me that; it made her feel so full of information. Betrayed by food, I let her go, and wept some watery tears into the kidney juice, which was designed anyway to evade cohesion, being thin and in its nature inexact. Then I ran out to the farthermost corner of the garden, where I would later go to hide my shame of milking-time in a retch that refused to materialize.

Born the following year, Tillat would not know that cautionary tale. Nor would she know what Ifat did when my father called from Lady Willingdon Hospital in Lahore to repeat that old phrase, "It is a girl." "It's a girl!" Ifat shouted, as though simply clinching for the world the overwhelming triumph of her will. Shahid, a year my senior, was found half an hour later sobbing next to the goldfish pond near the vegetable garden, for he had been banking on the diluting arrival of a brother. He must have been upset, because when we were taken to visit my mother, he left his penguin—a favorite toy—among the old trees of the hospital garden, where we had been sent to play. I was still uncertain about my relation to the status of this new baby: my sister was glad that it was a girl, and my brother was sad that it wasn't a boy, but we all stood together when penguiny was lost.

It is to my discredit that I forgot this story, both of what the kidney said and what it could have told to my still germinating sister. Had I borne something of those lessons in mind, it would have been less of a shock to have to reconceive the *kapura* parable; perhaps I'd have been prepared for more skepticism about the connection between kidneys and sweetbreads —after all, they fall into no logical category of togetherness. The culinary humor of kidneys and testicles stewing in one another's juices is, on the other hand, very fine: I wish I had had the imagination to intuit all the unwonted jokes people tell when they start cooking food. I should have remembered all those nervously comic edges, and the pangs, that constitute most poignancies of nourishment. And so, as an older mind, I fault myself for not having the wits to recognize what I already knew. I must have always known exactly what *kapura* are, because the conversation they provoked came accompanied with shocks of familiarity that typically attend a trade of solid information. What I had really wanted to reply, first to Tillat and then to my Pakistani friends, was: yes, of course, who do you think I am, what else could they *possibly be?* Anyone with discrimination could immediately discern the connection between *kapura* and their namesake: the shape is right, given that we are now talking about goats; the texture involves a bit of a bounce, which works; and the taste is altogether too exactly what it is. So I should have kept in mind that, alas, we know the flavor of each part of the anatomy: that much imagination belongs to

everyone's palate. Once, when my sisters and I were sitting in a sunny winter garden, Tillat began examining some ants that were tumbling about the blades of grass next to her chair. She looked acute and then suddenly said, "How very sour those little ants must be." Ifat declared that she had always thought the same herself, and though I never found out how they arrived at this discovery, I was impressed by it, their ability to take the world on their tongues.

So poor Irfani, how much his infant taste buds must have colored his perception of the grimness of each day. Irfan was born in London, finally another boy, but long after Shahid had ceased looking for playmates in the home. It now strikes me as peculiar that my parents should choose to move back to Pakistan when Farni was barely a year old, and to decide on June, that most pitiless month, in which to return to Lahore. The heat shriveled the baby, giving his face an expression of slow and bewildered shock, which was compounded by the fact that for the next year there was very little that the child could eat. Water boiled ten times over would still retain virulence enough to send his body into derangements, and goat's milk, cow's milk, everything liquid seemed to convey malevolence to his minuscule gut. We used to scour the city for aging jars of imported baby-food; these, at least, he would eat, though with a look of profound mistrust—but even so, he spent most of the next year with his body in violent rebellion against the idea of food. It gave his eyes a gravity they have never lost.

Youngster he was, learning lessons from an infant's intuition to fear food, and to some degree all of us were equally watchful for hidden trickeries in the scheme of nourishment, for the way in which things would always be missing or out of place in Pakistan's erratic emotional market. Items of security—such as flour or butter or cigarettes or tea—were always vanishing, or returning in such dubiously shiny attire that we could barely stand to look at them. We lived in the expectation of threatening surprise: a crow had drowned in the water tank on the roof, so for a week we had been drinking dead-crow water and couldn't understand why we felt so ill; the milkman had accidentally diluted our supply of milk with paraffin instead of water; and those were not pistachios, at all, in a tub of Hico's green ice cream. Our days and our newspapers were equally full of disquieting tales about adulterated foods and the preternaturally keen eye that the nation kept on such promiscuous blendings. I can understand it, the fear that food will not stay discrete but will instead defy our categories of expectation in what can only be described as a manner of extreme belligerence. I like order to a plate, and know the great sense of failure that attends a moment when what is potato to the fork is turnip to the mouth. It's hard, when such things happen.

So, long before the *kapura* made its comeback in my life, we in Pakistan

were bedmates with betrayal and learned how to take grim satisfaction from assessing the water table of our outrage. There were both lean times and meaty times, however; occasionally, body and food would sit happily at the same side of the conference table. Take, for example, Ramzan, the Muslim month of fasting, often recollected as the season of perfect meals. Ramzan, a lunar thing, never arrives at the same point of time each year, coming instead with an aura of slight and pleasing dislocation. Somehow it always took us by surprise: new moons are startling to see, even by accident, and Ramzan's moon betokened a month of exquisite precision about the way we were to parcel out our time. On the appointed evenings we would rake the twilight for that possible sliver, and it made the city and body both shudder with expectation to spot that little slip of a moon that signified Ramzan and made the sky historical. How busy Lahore would get! Its minarets hummed, its municipalities pulled out their old air-raid sirens to make the city noisily cognizant: the moon had been sighted, and the fast begun.

I liked it, the waking up an hour before dawn to eat the prefast meal and chat in whispers. For three wintry seasons I would wake up with Dadi, my grandmother, and Ifat and Shahid: we sat around for hours making jokes in the dark, generating a discourse of unholy comradeship. The food itself, designed to keep the penitent sustained from dawn till dusk, was insistent in its richness and intensity, with bread dripping clarified butter, and curried brains, and cumin eggs, and a peculiarly potent vermicelli, soaked overnight in sugar and fatted milk. And if I liked the getting up at dawn, then Dadi completely adored the eating of it all. I think she fasted only because she so enjoyed the *sehri* meal and that mammoth infusion of food at such an extraordinary hour. At three in the morning the rest of us felt squeamish about linking the deep sleep dreams we had just conducted and so much grease—we asked instead for porridge—but Dadi's eating was a sight to behold and admire. She hooted when the city's sirens sounded to tell us that we should stop eating and that the fast had now begun: she enjoyed a more direct relation with God than did petty municipal authorities and was fond of declaiming what Muhammad himself had said in her defense. He apparently told one of his contemporaries that *sehri* did not end until a white thread of light described the horizon and separated the landscape from the sky. In Dadi's book that thread could open into quite an active loom of dawning: the world made waking sounds, the birds and milkmen all resumed their proper functions, but Dadi's regal mastication—on the last brain now—declared it still was night.

I stopped that early rising years before Tillat and Irfan were old enough to join us, before Ifat ran away to get married, and before my father returned to ritual and overtook his son Shahid's absent place. So my mem-

ories of it are scant, the fast of the faithful. But I never lost my affection for the twilight meal, the dusky *iftar* that ended the fast after the mosques had lustily rung with the call for the *maghrib* prayer. We'd start eating dates, of course, in order to mimic Muhammad, but then with what glad eyes we'd welcome the grilled liver and the tang of pepper in the orange juice. We were happy to see the spinach leaves and their fantastical shapes, deftly fried in the lightest chick-pea batter, along with the tenderness of fresh fruit, most touching to the palate. There was a curious invitation about the occasion, converting what began as an act of penance into a godly and obligatory cocktail hour that provided a fine excuse for company and affability. When we lived in Pakistan, that little swerve from severity into celebration happened often. It certainly was true of meatless days.

The country was made in 1947, and shortly thereafter the government decided that two days out of each week would be designated as meatless days, in order to conserve the national supply of goats and cattle. Every Tuesday and Wednesday the butchers' shops would stay firmly closed, without a single carcass dangling from the huge metal hooks that lined the canopies under which the butchers squatted, selling meat, and without the open drains at the side of their narrow street ever running with a trace of blood. On days of normal trade, blood would briskly flow, carrying with it flotillas of chicken feathers, and little bits of sinew and entrail, or a bladder full and yellow that a butcher had just bounced deftly into the drain. On meatless days that world emptied into a skeletal remain: the hot sun came to scorch away all the odors and liquids of slaughter and shriveled on the chopping blocks the last curlicues of anything organic, making them look both vacant and precise.

As a principle of hygiene I suppose it was a good idea although it really had very little to do with conservation: the people who could afford to buy meat, after all, were those who could afford refrigeration, so the only thing the government accomplished was to make some people's Mondays very busy indeed. The Begums had to remember to give the cooks thrice as much money; the butchers had to produce thrice as much meat; the cooks had to buy enough flesh and fowl and other sundry organs to keep an averagely carnivorous household eating for three days. A favorite meatless day breakfast, for example, consisted of goat's head and feet cooked with spices into a rich and ungual sauce—remarkable, the things that people eat. And so, instead of creating an atmosphere of abstention in the city, the institution of meatless days rapidly came to signify the imperative behind the acquisition of all things fleshly. We thought about beef, which is called "big meat," and we thought about mutton, "little meat," and then we collectively thought about chicken, the most coveted of them all.

But here I must forget my American sojourn, which has taught me to

look on chicken as a notably undignified bird, with pimply skin and pockets of fat tucked into peculiar places and unnecessarily meaty breasts. Those meatless day fowls, on the other hand, were a thing apart. Small, not much bigger than the average quail, they had a skin that cooked to the texture of rice paper, breaking even over the most fragrant limbs and wings. Naturally we cherished them and lavished much care on trying to obtain the freshest of the crop. Once I was in Karachi with my sister Nuz when the thought that she had to engage in the social ferocity of buying chickens was making her quite depressed. We went anyway, with Nuz assuming an alacrity that had nothing to do with efficiency and everything to do with desperation. Nuz stood small and dark in the chicken-monger's shop, ordered her birds, paid for them, and then suddenly remembered her housewifely duty. "Are they fresh?" she squawked, clutching at them, "Can you promise me they're fresh?" The chicken-monger looked at her with some perplexity. "But Begum Sahib," he said gently, "they're alive."

"Oh," said Nuz, "so they are," and calmed down immediately. I have always admired her capacity to be reassured by the world and take without a jot of embarrassment any comfort it is prepared to offer. So I thought she had forgotten about the issue of freshness as we drove home (with the dejected chickens tied up in a rope basket on the back seat) and the Karachi traffic grew lunchtime crazed. But "Oh," she said again, half an hour later, "So a fresh chicken is a dead chicken." "Not too dead," I replied. It made us think of meatless days as some vast funeral game, where Monday's frenetic creation of fresh things beckoned in the burial meals of Tuesday and Wednesday. "Food," Nuz said with disgust—"It's what you bury in your body." To make her feel less alone, we stopped at Shezan's on the way home, to get her an adequate supply of marzipan; for she eats nothing but sweet things. Food she'll cook—wonderful *Sindi* tastes, exotic to my palate—but sugar is the only thing Nuz actually wants to taste.

Irfan was the same about birds. He preferred to grow them rather than eat them. There was a time when he had a hundred doves on the roof of the Khurshid Alam Road house, which was quite a feat, considering that they'd had to be kept a strict secret from my father. Papa hated doves, associating them with the effete gambling of Deccan princedoms or with Trafalgar Square and his great distaste of the English ability to combine rain and pigeon droppings. So Irfan built dovecote after dovecote on our roof, while Papa had no idea of the commerce and exchange beneath which he was living. When he stayed at home to write, every sound would send him snarling, so then he heard with passionate hatred the long and low dove murmurings. He groaned and pulled his hair to think that his rooftop could actually be hospitable to pigeons: every evening he would dispatch Irfan to stand on the flat brick roof that was designed for sum-

mer sleep beneath the stars, so that he could shoo the birds away before they even dreamed of cooing. Since twilight was the hour when Farni preferred to feed the doves, life between him and Papa was perfect for a while. But then things fell apart. One afternoon Papa suddenly remembered that Irfan was at school and felt it incumbent on himself to gather as much information as he could about the academic progress of his youngest child, the renegade. In the evenings two tutors would come to coach Irfan in Urdu and math, and to them my father turned for an assessment of his son. "Too unhappy!" wailed the math master, "Today just too sad!" Papa bridled with defensiveness, asking for more specific fact. "Cat, sir, cat," mourned the Urdu teacher, "Cat has eaten up his fifty doves." The math master shook his head in commiseration, and Papa later liked to claim that his mind went from "bats in the belfry" through every possible idiomatic permutation he could give to cats and doves, until—only just realizing he had heard a literal truth—he stared from one face to the next, like a man aghast with knowledge.

Am I wrong, then, to say that my parable has to do with nothing less than the imaginative extravagance of food and all the transmogrifications of which it is capable? Food certainly gave us a way not simply of ordering a week or a day but of living inside history, measuring everything we remembered against a chronology of cooks. Just as Papa had his own yardstick—a word he loved—with which to measure history and would talk about the Ayub era, or the second martial law, or the Bhutto regime, so my sisters and I would place ourselves in time by remembering and naming cooks. "In the Qayuum days," we'd say, to give a distinctive flavor to a particular anecdote, or "in the Allah Ditta era." And our evocations only get more passionate now that cooks are a dying breed in Pakistan and have left us for the more ample kitchens of the gulf states and the more cramped but lucrative spaces of the Curries in a Hurry at Manchester and Leeds. There is something nourishing about the memory of all those shadow dynasties: we do not have to subsist only on the litany that begins, "After General Ayub came General Yahya; after the Bhutto years came General Zulu Haq," but can also add; "Qayuum begat Shorty and his wife; and they begat the Punjabi poet only called Khansama; he begat Ramzan and Karam Dad the bearer; Ramzan begat Tassi-Passi, and he begat Allah Ditta, meanest of them all."

We were always waiting for Allah Ditta to die. He was a good cook and a mean man who announced the imminence of his death for years, though he ended up surviving nearly half of the family. Still, he was useful. My mother was a nervous cook—probably because her mother had been a stern woman about such decorum—and was glad to be able to turn everything over to Allah Ditta and take refuge instead in the university. It is odd to recall that her precise mind could see a kitchen as an empty space;

I think she had given suck so many times and had engaged in so many umbilical connections that eating had become syncopated in her head to that miraculous shorthand. Not that pregnancy was a mystical term in her lexicon: on the contrary, the idea would make her assume a fastidious and pained expression. So she absolutely understood when Ifat, large with Ayesha this time, wafted into the house and murmured, "Do you know what it is like to have something kicking at you all the time and realize that you can never kick it back?" Mamma, never one to state the obvious, would look up pleadingly at that, as though the obvious was so much with us anyway that we all deserved to be spared its articulation. Or she would utter one of her curious archaisms: "Don't fret, child," she'd say, "don't fret."

But Ifat was good at fretting, apt at creating an aura of comfort by being able to characterize precisely the details of anything that could be discomforting to her. And so the state of pregnancy could on occasion make her eyes abstract, as she looked down at herself and vaguely said, "I've eaten too much, I've eaten too much." "There's too much body about the business," she once told me, "and too much of it is your own." Later, when Ayesha was born, a girl with blue unfurling fingers, the baby still would not permit my sister to empty into peace. She refused to eat enough, bloating her mother's breasts into helpless engorgement. So Ifat lay in bed, surrounded by such instruments of torture as breast pumps and expressers and her great facility for imprecation. Expressing letters rather than breasts was my normal ken, and it hurt to watch the meticulousness with which she set about relieving her body of that extraneous liquid. It was worse than a dentist, and for hours we implored her to take respite, but Ifat would not stop until her ferocious fever turned to sweat and her face was as white as in labor. Then she slept, waking once out of a dream like a beautiful gaunt owl to look at me oddly and say, "Mamma fed me once." In the morning the infant ate, and when Ifat's breasts lost their raging heat, it was as though stiffness could leave the entire household, erect as we had been to her distress. "Ordinary pumps again," she breathed, "they're mine again, at last." We smiled at that. Hard to believe, today, that those machines are gone for good.

For Ifat always was a fine source of stories about the peculiarities of food, particularly on the points of congruence between the condition of pregnancy and the circumstance of cooking, since both teeter precariously between the anxieties of being overdone and being underdone. When I left Pakistan, I had to learn how to cook—or, better—how to conceive of a kitchen as a place where I actually could be private. Now I like to cook, although I remain fascinated by my deep-seated inability to boil an egg exactly to the point that I would like to see it boiled, which seems like such an easy accomplishment of the efficient. I have finally come to the

realization that I must feel slightly peculiar about eggs, because I am uneasy until they have been opened up and the flagrant separation between yolk and egg can be whisked into some yellow harmony. When I simply try to boil an egg, I've noticed, I am sure to give it an unconsciously advertent crack, so that the humming water suddenly swirls with something viscous, and then I have to eat my eggs with gills and frills. Not that I very frequently boil an egg: once in five years, perhaps. I can distinctly remember the last occasion: it was when I was about to be visited by the tallest man in my acquaintance, in the days when I still used to tolerate such things.

He was a curious chap, whose bodily discomfort with the world was most frequently expressed in two refrains: one was "Not enough food!" and the second, "Too much food!" During the era of our association, I rapidly learned that the one intimacy we had to eschew above all others was the act of making meals and eating them alone. We could eat in restaurants and public places, surrounded by the buffer of other tables and strangers' voices, but for the two of us to be making and taking a meal on our own was such a fearful thought that the physical largess at my side would break into a myriad of tiny quakes. It was revelatory for me, who had never before watched someone for whom a dining table was so markedly more of a loaded domestic space than was a bed, but I was not totally averse to this new logic. It exercised my imagination to devise oblique methods of introducing food into my house, free-floating and aimless items that could find their way into anyone's mouth with such studied carelessness that they could do no damage to the integrity of a flea. I felt as though I were still in Sussex, putting out a saucer of milk and goodwill for the hedgehogs in the garden and then discreetly vanishing before they froze into prickles of shyness and self-dismay. "What is it, after all, between food and the body?" I asked one day in an exasperation of pain, and never got an answer in reply.

Tom and Tillat tried to behave like friends; they cooked together in a way I liked—but with me the man was so large that he could conceive of himself only in bits, always conscious of how segments of his body could go wandering off, tarsals and metatarsals heedlessly autonomous. Such dissipation made him single-minded. He never worried about the top of his head, because he had put it behind him. His mother chose his glasses for him. His desires made him merely material: he looked at himself just as a woman looks when her infant takes its first tremulous step into the upright world, melting her into a modesty of consternation and pride. And his left hand could never see what his right hand was doing, for they were too far apart, occupying as they did remote hemispheres of control. Perhaps I should have been able to bring those bits together, but such a narrative was not available to me, not after what I knew of storytelling.

Instead, we watched the twist through which food became our staple metaphor, suggesting that something of the entire event had—against our will—to do with hunger. "You do not have the backbone of a shrimp," I mourned, gazing up at the spread-sheet of that man mountain. "You have a head the size of a bowl of porridge and a brain the size of a pea." This was in a restaurant. I was surprised beyond measure when that big head bent back and wept, a quick summer shower of tears. By the time he left, all surfaces were absolutely dry.

In any event, rain in America has never felt to me like a condition of glad necessity, and Tom and I will never know the conversations that we might have had on something like the twelfth of August in Lahore, for nothing can approximate what the monsoons make available in happy possibility. I think it was the smell that so intoxicated us after those dreary months of nostril-scorching heat, the smell of dust hissing at the touch of rain and then settling down, damply placid on the ground. People could think of eating again: after the first rains, in July, they gave themselves over to a study of mangoes, savoring in high seriousness the hundred varieties of that fruit. When it rained in the afternoons, children were allowed to eat their mangoes in the garden, stripped naked and dancing about, first getting sticky with mango juice and then getting slippery with rain. In our time such games drove Ifat and Shahid and me quite manic in our merriment, while Mamma sat reading on a nearby monsoon veranda to censor us if we transgressed too far. Years later, Tillat and I served a similar function when Ifat left her children with us—we sat on the veranda, letting them play in the rain. Ifat would have rushed off to shop or to do something equally important, while her children would long for Irfan, whom they loved boisterously, to come back from school. Mamma, on such afternoons, would not be there. It returns as a poignancy to me, that I have forgotten where Mamma could possibly be on such an occasion.

She was not there on the afternoon when, after the rains had whetted our appetites, I went out with my old friends Nuzhat Ahmad and Ayla, as the three of us often did, in a comradeship of girlhood. We went driving to Bagh-e-Jinnah, formerly known as Lawrence Gardens, located opposite the Governor's House along the Mall in Lahore. We were trying to locate the best *gol guppa* vendor in town and stopped by to test the new stand in Lawrence Gardens. *Gol guppas* are a strange food: I have never located an equivalent to them or their culinary situation. They are an outdoor food, a passing whim, and no one would dream of recreating their frivolity inside her own kitchen. A *gol guppa* is a small hollow oval of the lightest pastry that is dipped into a fiery liquid sauce made of tamarind and cayenne and lemon and cold water. It is evidently a food invented as a joke, in a moment of good humor. We stopped the car next to some tall jaman trees

(which many years before Shahid and I loved to climb) and enjoyed ourselves a great deal, until a friendly elbow knocked the bowl of *gol guppa* sauce all over my lap. It gave me a new respect for foodstuffs, for never has desire brought me to quite such an instantaneous effect. My groin's surprise called attention to passageways that as a rule I am only theoretically aware of owning, all of which folded up like a concertina in protest against such an explosive aeration. For days after, my pupils stayed dilated, while my interiors felt gaunt and hollow-eyed.

I retold this ten-year-old episode to Tillat when she came visiting, shortly after she had hit me over the head with her testicles-equal-*kapura* tale. I was trying to cheer her up and distract her from the rather obvious fact that, once again, her children were refusing to eat. "Do you know how much happier my life would be if my children would eat?" Tillat wailed, and there was little I could say to deny it. "It's your fault, Tatty," I said consolingly, "your body manufactured chocolate milk." Certainly those children had a powerful impulse toward chocolate: it was deranging, to pull out the Cadbury's for breakfast. It gave Tillat a rather peculiar relation to food: it made her a good cook but a somewhat stern one, as though she were always waiting for her meals to undergo a certain neurotic collapse. One day she turned quite tragic, cooking for some visitors of mine, when the *shami kebabs* she was frying obstinately refused to cohere into their traditional shape. I did not expect Tillat's moonface to look so wracked, as though the secret of all things lay in that which made the *shami* cling to the *kebab.* "Never mind, Tillat. We'll just call them Kuwaiti *kebabs* and then no one will know they look peculiar." Of course I was right, and the meal was most satisfactory.

I missed Tillat's children when they left. There are too many of them, of course—all of my siblings have had too many. Each year I resolve afresh that my quota of aunthood is full, that I no longer am going to clutter my head with new names, new birthdays. But then something happens, like finding in the mail another photograph of a new baby, and against my will they draw me in again. I did not see Ifat's children for four years after she had died, and when Tillat and I visited them in Rawalpindi, in the pink house on the hill, Ayesha, the youngest, whispered to her paternal grandmother, "My aunts smell like my mother." When she repeated that to me, it made me tired and grave. Tillat and I slept for ten hours that night, drowning in a sleep we could not forestall, attempting to waken and then falling back exhausted into another dreamless hour.

I described that sleep to Shahid, wondering about it, during one of our rare encounters. I was trying to imagine what it would be like not to meet his children again, since in those days he had lost them. We talked about that, he and I, walking through the benign winter of a London afternoon, while the light was failing in irregular slashes. I always feel quiet to be

walking at his side, glad to notice all the ways his face has taken age and yet remains the same. That face and I occupied the same playpen, ate sand out of the same sandbox together. I had not seen him for two years, which made me tender when we met, talking about how we could not see Surraya and Karim, his children. "I'll tell you what it's like, Sara," Shahid said. Then he stopped still and looked at me. "It's like the thing that a lush forgets, which is the absence of extremity."

All at once I felt relieved my mother was not there to overhear such conversation. I was glad that I had never seen, could no longer see, the cast her face would surely have taken hearing that sentence from her son. I wanted her to be put where she should be put, away from all of this, back in a bed where she need not have to know the desperate sleep Tillat and I had slept, hour after hour of reaching for the shoreline only to be pulled back into unending night. It was almost her reproach that I wished to be spared, the quiet voice that would look up and say, "Honestly, you children." I was afraid she would tell us that we were just as careless with our children as we had been with our books or our toys or our clothes, and I did not want to hear her proven right. The chagrin of the thought perplexed me as Shahid and I walked on, until I suddenly remembered the chagrin on Barkat the washerman's face when he was three days late in bringing back our school uniforms. Mamma's Urdu was an erratic thing, with sudden moments of access into idioms whose implications would throw her audience into gasps of surprise. When Barkat's recalcitrance kept her children denuded of clean white starched shirts and dresses to wear to school each day, Mamma's Urdu took a deep breath and opened the nearest idiomatic door, which sent her unknowing into the great precisions of classic amorous discourse. Barkat did not know where to look in his chagrin when Mamma gazed at him and said, her reproach as clear as a bell, "Barkat, how could you cause me such exquisite pain?" I reminded Shahid of that story. It made us laugh from Connaught Court to Edgware Road.

Tillat has three children, none of whom my mother ever saw, and I missed them after they left New Haven. I could not forget the way Tillat's three-year-old and only daughter, called Heba, broke my heart when she refused to swallow food. She sat at a table putting food in her mouth and growing chipmunk cheeks: we would try to ignore them as long as we could, but Heba knew how nervous we were getting, that we would soon break down and let her spit her mouthfuls out, whereupon she could resume her lovely jabber as though no grief had transpired at all. She ravaged me, but somehow it was consoling to be so readily available to pain and to observe in her manner and her face some ancient lineaments of my own. One day she startled me by confidentially saying that her brother Omi has a penis, but she has blood. When I asked her what she

meant, "I looked inside to see," she answered, and glanced at me pragmatically. It made me glad for her that she had had such introspective courage to knock at the door of her body and insist it let her in. Heba has large eyes, as black as grapes, and hands that she wields like an Indian dancer. "Why don't you like me, Omi?" she would ask relentlessly. "I'm nice, too." It drove her elder brother into furies of rage. "I don't like you! I don't!" Omi shouted, while Heba looked at him with curiosity. Watching over her baby patience, I realized I need not worry about her, that child who was busy adding herself to the world and would not rest until it had made her properly welcome, long after she had forgotten me.

It reminds me that I am glad to have washed my hands of my sister Ifat's death and can think of her now as a house I once rented but which is presently inhabited by people I do not know. I miss her body, of course, and how tall she was, with the skull of a leopard and the manner of a hawk. But that's aesthetic, and aside from it, Ifat is just a repository of anecdotes for me, something I carry around without noticing, like lymph. One morning last year I woke myself up at dawn to escape the involutions of a dream that held me like a tax collector in a place where I did not want to be. For a moment I could not remember what city I was in, or what bedroom, until everything became lucid as I realized that Ifat was dead at last. "Darling, what a nosebleed," I found myself saying before I slept again and paid my dues.

Thus Nuz was right, absolutely right, when she wrote to me in her sprawling handwriting that looks so much like Karachi and said indignantly, "Of course my hair is going to fall out, what do you expect, when life is so full of stress? Now I wear a wig and look smarter than ever." Then she added, with the uncanny knowledge only Nuz can muster, "People are only good for light conversation." I liked the way that phrase lingered, born as it was from Nuzzi's unwitting capacity for the lingering phrase. The last time I was in London, I never saw Shahid's face light up so brightly as when he showed me a card that read, in florid script, "Greetings from Pakistan," beneath the image of some bustling Pathan dancers. Inside it Nuz had written, "Dearest Shahid, I am so sorry to hear of your divorce, my mother has had a brain hemorrhage and I am completely shattered, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. Love, Nuz." Nuzzi's mother was my father's first wife, and also his cousin, so I suppose she can count as a relative of ours although we have never met. Luckily she made a miraculous recovery before Nuz went completely bald.

My own mother would hate it that we could laugh at such a tale. Such merriment made her look at her progeny with suspicion, unable to accept that she could ever whelp this mordant laughter. When Ifat was pregnant with Alia, I remember how worried Mamma looked one day when she came across Ifat's first child, little Tunsi-boy, telling his nurse that Ama

had eaten another baby so he'd have a brother or a sister soon. "So they think you eat them up!" I was full of exclamation when Ifat told me this story, which made us laugh in poignant glee. Mamma came into the room and looked at us in a growing recognition of dismay. "Perhaps you do," she quietly said.

Five years later, I wish I had understood and remembered my mother's reprimand during the week she finally died. Sitting in the American Midwest, I thought of all my brothers and sisters, who watched my mother die in the jaunty dawn of a March day and who—fatigued and uncaring of the delicious respite of the dateline—gave me eight hours when Mamma was still historically alive. In a Lahore dawn on the ninth of March my mother's body failed to register on the hospital's gray screens; I in America was informed on the eighth, so technically I had a few more hours of my mother's life to savor before I needed to consign her into the ground. It made me secretly angry that such a reticent woman could choose to do something so rash and declarative as to die in such a double-handed way.

And then, when I was trying to move away from the raw irritability of grief, I dreamed a dream that left me reeling. It put me in London, on the pavement of some unlovely street, an attempted crescent of vagrant houses. A blue van drove up: I noticed it was a refrigerated car and my father was inside it. He came to tell me that we must put my mother in her coffin, and he opened the blue hatch of the van to make me reach inside, where it was very cold. What I found were hunks of meat wrapped in cellophane, and each of them felt like Mamma, in some odd way. It was my task to carry those flanks across the street and to fit them into the coffin at the other side of the road, like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. Although my dream will not let me recall how many trips I made, I know my hands felt cold. Then, when my father's back was turned, I found myself engaged in rapid theft—for the sake of Ifat and Shahid and Tillat and all of us, I stole away a portion of that body. It was a piece of her foot I found, a small bone like a knuckle, which I quickly hid inside my mouth, under my tongue. Then I and the dream dissolved, into an extremity of tenderness.

It is hard to believe today that I thought the dream too harsh a thing. As parable, the *kapura* does not dare to look much further. It wishes to take the taste of my imagination only quite so far and, like my mother, makes me trebly entranced; had I really been perplexed at such a simple thing? Or perhaps my mind had designed me to feel rudely tender. I had eaten, that was all, and woken to a world of meatless days.