

selection from American Canyon
(Document of a snake ritual)

Amarnath Ravva

02:10:35:00

This is a town of pilgrims and sages. One of the pujaris, who sits next to Chandra by the door, speaks Telegu. Chandra turns to him to translate. He looks at me and says *you have a sarpa doshum, so when you offer flowers ask for forgiveness from the snake you killed. Pray to her. Ask for what you want. If you know your kulla devi, pray to her too, she is upset because you have ignored her. When you finish here and return home, perform a puja at your kulla devi's temple.* I will find out later that a kulla devi is a local goddess specific to your ancestral home. I will think it is Podilamma, but pedda atta will tell me it is another one on a hill above Podilli. Jayjaya built this temple and our family is the only one that goes there. The next time I return, I will walk up that hill. One ritual leads to others as you progress through the deaths of your family and end up at your own. They hand me the harati and ask me to turn it around the navagrahas, and then bless the small fire burning in ghee three times. I show devotion through rotations; the proof, which is the smoke suspended in the air between this world and another, disappears. I had expected to perform a ritual for the first time without my parents when my father died. Only sons and brothers are allowed to observe and participate. After the cremation, bits of bone that survive the fire are collected, called flowers, and are scattered in the river. They ask me to pray. I close my eyes.

Jayjaya owned a small farm on the outskirts of town when my father was young. When I visit, pedda atta is afraid that I will get lost. My father had lost his way to the farm as a child and she thinks I'm as bookish as him. I don't think I could get lost here. There is only one main road. People tell me that Jayjaya showed up one day and set up a bidi stall. When his father had died the eldest brother, Subbarayadu, inherited the house in Markapur and kicked the rest of the brothers out.

I wanted to see the well of my grandfather's family in Gajula Konda but they told me none exists. I would find people who never knew our history and a small dry river near a few thatched roofs.

The stall carried more products over the years, from bidis to mita-pan to cigarettes to pots and pans. He adopted his two nephews and took care of his sister-in-law, Guramma, when his second eldest brother died. Jayjaya never spoke to Subbarayadu after what had happened in Markapur.

In 1992 he couldn't talk. Sounds from the road surrounded his body made still by age in the old cot at the top of the stairs on the balcony. His legs and arms were like figs that had fallen from their branches weeks before.

02:10:38:00

Your eyes reflect what you can't express by holding my hand. The bell rings in the temple you built behind your house that you will fall asleep in, waking up in a place where my hand is gone.

I visited your other brother, Pitchaya, at his house in Markapur. A heart attack made him silent, and he was lying on a twine and wood cot half in the shade of the front porch of his house. He used to give me chalk and slate boards from his small factory. I liked the wood frames they had and the variety of chalks he would give us.

His eyes reflected a love that he expressed by crying.

Two years later I will get a telegram. You died in your sleep with a smile on your face. You didn't talk to your nephew, the one who was born years ago unable to speak, but you watched him grow up like a slow tree that bears the quietest of fruit. Your son took me from your old wood cot to your nephew's, and told me,

See our cousins across the street? The rest of the family ignores them because of what their father did years ago. But the price he paid was more than our silence. His only son was born unable to speak. He spent sixty years of his life ringing the bell at school. That is all he can do.

After so many years when I ran past your house to play on the hand cranked Ferris wheel on its summer tour through towns like this one where everyone is afraid that the wheel will break, spilling us onto the dirt, I met you. When I looked into your eyes you didn't see what we shared. You died on your cot and sounds faded around you.

Of chalk on slate.

The ring of a bell.

Lids falling on eyes.

02:11:20:00

I keep my eyes closed. Around me, they are waiting, cross legged before the blue wall, or next to Chandra in front of the pink one. Where the two colors meet in the corner of the room there is nothing but empty space. They ask me to pray but I have nothing left to ask. I wait for my memories to finish jogging. For a decade the India I knew never changed. Under the balance in the cabinet of his shop, Jayjaya still kept three silver coins from the turn of the century for luck. When he looked out into the street, my India was there to greet him.

The balcony at the top of the stairs was no longer there. The floor fell off into the air above the road. A few metal rods, once held in concrete, dangled where a wall used to be. Across the street the neighbor was staring out of what once was the front of his house. All our balconies had disappeared leaving us open to the road below.