

## A COVER SONG

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*To the Made in India manhole cover at University of Washington, Seattle:*

We have traveled 7,000 miles to get here. Where your journey ends, mine begins. I paused at the intersection when words that spell home sat unexpectedly by my feet, by everyone's feet. I remember feeling surprisingly pleased but absurdly protective about the horde of feet walking over you. *Respect words, respect books* leapt from my subconscious; voices drilled in childhood are hard to unbraids as an adult. But even without the charms of fabulously painted, pastel-hued manhole covers I had photographed in Japan, you made me pause and ponder. It could have been homesickness but I wasn't willing to admit to it. Though it wouldn't be unnatural for a graduate student to miss wintry afternoons in her dusty old city of crumbling forts and sandstone minarets. Just as it wouldn't be unnatural for her to block from her mind the maze of mess and stares, the odors, and touches, also intricately knotted in its veins. Delhi sings you with her song but at twenty-four I didn't know to look back. I was young and restless and endlessly and breathlessly in love with getting lost in the university campus, with its labyrinthine paths that meandered from building to building, where I was certain I had stumbled onto hidden secrets that were revealed only to me: underground cafes with ugly sculptures, a greenhouse with a tropical dream forest. My mind buzzing with distractions, I am surprised I noticed you. I wouldn't have, had the crosswalk sign been turned on. I can't explain this chance glance—why my roaming eyes

settled on you. Neither can I explain the serendipity that places us at the unique configuration of time and place, where events seem to unravel for our eyes alone. My logical mind intervenes: Is serendipity just another name for attentiveness, or is it an overdose of self-indulgence? None of which I pondered on that afternoon. All I know is, despite my questions, I was curiously happy to have noticed you by my feet. You changed the way I walk. Already meandering at a pace that kept songbirds and nuthatches within my view, I slowed to inspect manhole covers, taking pictures if they were *Made in India*. I discovered your clones in Portland, Chicago, Atlanta, New York. I've smiled apologetically at polite strangers who waited while I took pictures. Most walked away but some asked questions and one offered food—the falafel food truck vendor in New York, who was in fact a Bangladeshi poet with a sonorous voice. We sang his national anthem that I only knew the first line of, but the rest he sang with such gusto that I wished for an audience greater than one. The worlds we guard under our skin as though they would mature and earn interest for us—how surprising is their glitter when aired. I knew I would learn more about you when thoughts of you emerged fleetingly as I flowed through life, as if you wanted to remind me that there was a mystery to solve. Besides, every immigrant has a journey story. Mine doesn't count because I have left the door to my country slightly ajar, to retreat if I have to, but after two decades, two children, and having formed roots as gnarly as the banyan entwined around the pine, I wonder if I'd ever kick open that door or if I'd slam it shut. What if I find that it is cobwebbed beyond my reach when I decide to leave? I don't have answers to these questions. It is your journey that I find more mysterious, considering there's so little information about you online. I thought the answer to the 7,000-mile journey would have been in *Cast in India*, a documentary by anthropologist and professor Natasha Raheja, but what I found was something far more revelatory. Like most manhole covers imported from India, you too were molded in iron foundries near Kolkata, the city where I was born. I also discovered something that I had taken for granted—the back-breaking, dangerous labor that goes into your making. In the footage, workers traveling by trains arrive at a foundry,

head to a room to change into rolled-up cotton pants, and immediately begin melting cast iron and pouring it into molds. Barefooted and sweaty, working like chimes, they laugh, discuss problems, chat about a friend's upcoming marriage. It was faint at first, but my ears picked up a tune amid the foundry sounds. On increasing the laptop volume, music flowed into my bedroom. From the darkness of the factory, refrains of a song in Bengali wafted out; the sound of workers singing in the dark, their faces aglow in flying sparks. Squinting and peering closer, I could read the subtitles. Poured into the furnace, soldered into the covers was a haunting melody of longing and lost love. Was it your song that pulled me closer?

I used to think of home as a point to return to, the way salmon swim upstream to their birth place. But I am beginning to realize that home is not a fixture. Just as we aren't. Most manhole covers are replaced every few decades. Where you go from here I can't tell. Where I will end up I can't tell. For now, it's enough to know I live close to the intersection of my two homes.