

DIXIE SALAZAR

Letting Go to Hold On, 2015
Painted collage, 40 x 30 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

MALA GAONKAR

Burn 'em in Crates

“I don't know what she thinks she is doing,” Leela heard her grandmother tell Mrs. Kilpady. “She will not get into this American school. Even if she does, how can we pay? Her school marks are only average. She draws her plants; picks those weeds in the British cemetery for her flower book. Her parents' ashes, blessings be on them, were scattered back in Ohio, in America, you know, so who knows what the girl is thinking. At first I am thinking it was the grief. If even I can summon the strength, Lord Krishna willing. She is sixteen . . . in a few years . . . an unmarried girl soon stinks like old fish. Do you know she took that flower album to the Wodeyar house?”

Leela, eavesdropping from the house roof, two floors up, could only smell Bangalore: sandalwood, shit, dust, ash. She fed the skinny stray cat some bread; sometimes it was gray, in other lights, a dust brown. It rubbed up against her bare legs.

“Be careful,” Mrs. Kilpady said, happily sipping a sweet milky chai, “That Wodeyar clan is a strange one. They live by their own laws, these onetime princes. The son is a great botanist; that must be the magnet for all the ladies, the advice on flowers,” Mrs. Kilpady smirked now. “These parties are there,” the old lady continued, with an avid glint, her weight creaking the rattan chair, “Foreign style. Stroking of head is there. This Western dancing-embracing is there with these people.”

“Yet the house?” Mrs. Kilpady paused to gulp her tea. “Still unpainted. The old man's doctor's fees suck the money away, maybe. The garden is good, though. Lord Krishna's Vrindavan. Melon-hipped roses. It must be the dung. The wife died while locked away, no? The mind rotten. Sometimes thought she was a tree, the maids say. Does the girl even know that you are not . . .”

“Be quiet. I raised her mother from when she was a baby. She was as much mine as anything I carried.”

“And you, keeping to the sitting room for days to keep the rest of the house clean for her arrival! I remember all you have done,” Mrs. Kilpady soothed her friend.

Leela stood very still. She rubbed a small lobsterish scar on her forearm. She was surprised how little what was said of her seemed to matter. Maybe your parents dying did that to you, she thought; it put you in a glass jar, a specimen apart, merely observing what passed you by? The cat, as it often did, stretched and said, “I have it too, that scar.