

THE MONGERJI LETTERS

GEETHA IYER

Orion

Since the collapse of one of the last dynasties of the Common Era and the subsequent end of the era itself, historians have searched for descendants of the Mongerji family, as well as descendants of the scribes who, under their employ, collected samplings of flora and fauna from around the world. The only evidence discovered thus far are the letters that follow. They are from Mr. Mongerji, his wife, Kavita, and two of the three Mongerji children, all addressed to a Mr. Chappalwala, thought to have been the last of the Mongerjis' scribes. Archivists continue to seek Mr. Chappalwala's side of the correspondence.

September 7, 18

Young Mr. Chappalwala,

This once, I wish my family's long correspondence with yours were more of a face-to-face transaction. Your letter telling of old Mr. Chappalwala's passing has stricken us all. The Mrs. has not spoken more than ten words, and even the children are subdued. They feel their parents' grief. I find it hard to write even now—to acknowledge receipt of goods delivered, to speak of our continued business.

But the polar bear you stuck in the inner envelope suggests you are keen to continue in the family trade. That first explosion of teeth and air bubbles as the creature snapped at my face—what air! learned to swim backward that day, you know? It took a week to bail out the living room and [pour the Arctic Ocean] back [into the envelope] - DISCORD

Our three-year-old, thankfully, was in the nursery when I released your capture, and thus spared his first swim. Meanwhile, our middle child, so enthralled by what you'd done, put on a diving suit and plunged right into the water. She stayed there for hours at a time. We nearly wondered if we'd lost the girl, and it was not until the living room was almost dry that the Mrs., in an inspired frenzy, thought to search inside the granary vase in the corner. We tipped out the last of the ocean into the outstretched envelope and grabbed our daughter by the ankles as she tried to follow.

The Mrs. remains put out. After the first shock, she said to me, "I would dearly like to see that young man right now," and I am not sure if she wanted to scold you for your exuberant capture or condole with you for your loss. She could not stop hugging our eldest boy, so perhaps it was the latter. He, you may know, will inherit the Mongerji collection and one day take over my correspondence with you. He did not like the bear—I believe it might have frightened him—but I think he will learn to appreciate your taste just as I learned to appreciate your father's.

The inventor of Dystopia?

FUN TO SAY?

HA

GOOD USE OF ENCL.

EXUBERANT ACT. USE

ARTFUL DROPPING OF HINTS RE THE GREATER WORLD.

Yes, you may consider this letter a renewal of the contract between our families. The unrest in these parts, I assure you, is a trifle, and should not come in the way of our important work. I enclose the usual sum of money. The clutch of purple bell flowers is a token from the Mrs. I believe they are from the collection, something your father must have sent us long ago. We keep him in our thoughts, and watch how you will follow him.

In anticipation,
Mr. Mongerji

→ NICE PACING OVERALL TO THE WRITING

June 5, —19

Mr. Chappalwala (Jr.),

→ SECONDARY PLOT LINE IN THE BACKGROUND

Sir, my father requests that I write to you because he is engaged on urgent business in the city, and my mother is busy looking through the collection for important les. He says it will be good practice for me for the future, but I think by then we shall all have to go into hiding. I tried to explain this to my little sister and brother, but they are silly and won't listen to me. Jayu said she would go hide right now, and snuck into the letter with the sleeping octopus. But I stopped her from taking my little brother in with her. I am not irresponsible. GREAT CHARACTERIZATION

You see, my tutor, Mr. Ali, says the people don't trust us anymore, that they think we own what belongs to ~~them~~ ee. He says he hears murmurings from the village, and that we should all be prepared to ee. I don't understand it, really. I asked my father why we couldn't just give stuff away if others wanted it so badly—there are so many envelopes in our house that we wouldn't even miss them. He gave me such a look. He said I might as well scatter my ancestors' bones. As if I would do such a thing.

I have been patrolling the grounds with the night watchman, and I think I have another solution. In your next letter, can you send us a stampede? We could use it to frighten people off our grounds. Perhaps, then, my father will see I'm ready for his work—can you believe, he told me to copy from an old letter when writing to you? As if I didn't know how to say "Dear Sir" and "Thank you" for myself. — Haha, HE DIDN'T. SUBTLE HUMOR THROUGHOUT

Sincerely,
R. Mongerji (Jr.)

August 28 (-22)

DATES, SALUTATIONS, ETC... PART OF THE CONSTRUCT AND CLUES TO?
IS THIS THE STORY?

Dear Mr. Chappalwala (Jr.),

This brief note confirms our change of address. The move to the city has been trying. Our new house is a two-story apartment. A top-floor loft, to be fair, and much more than I could have hoped for in our rush to secure a new living arrangement after the riots. But it will be quite difficult to curate the Mongerji collection in such meager environs. I am in conversations with the

WRITING OVERALL VERY LUCID

→ IMPORTANT?
MOTIVATION?

city's museum directors and the head of the opera house but, until then, most showings of the collection are quite humble affairs, pedestal displays of butterflies and ferns in the living room.

We are fortunate that the ^(ANACHRONISM) brass microscopes survived the move—the mayor was quite impressed with the diatom samplings you sent back from the Great Lakes this summer. It gives me an idea—when you trek the glacial sheets again this winter, would you look out for dark dimples against the blue ice? They are balls of moss collected around dustflecks—the locals call them glacier mice. I am told that entire herds of microscopic, eight-legged water bears lurk in that velvet warmth. It would make a fascinating presentation piece to the mayor. These days I find I need such friends more and more.

In expectance,

Mr. Mongerji



August 28, -22

Dear Mr. Chappalwala-ji,

My name is Abhimanyu Mongerji, but you can call me Abhi, like everyone else does. I am writing because Ammi said I must thank you for sending me the albino gray wolf cub for my seventh birthday. Daddy said it was not really meant to be a present—he wanted it for his work—but Ammi said it was only fair, because when Jayu-dhidhi and Rohan-bhaiya each turned seven, she got a fox cub and he got a baby camel with two humps.

Dhidhi's fox cub letter is lost, and Bhaiya said he sold his camel to someone at his new school, even though I think someone actually stole it off him. I tried to share my wolf cub with them both, except Bhaiya doesn't really like your letters anymore, and Dhidhi, well, she always complains that we should go to the cub's world instead of bringing the cub to us, so they're both no fun at all.

VOICE
BREAK

I have been thinking—were the albino cub's mother and father also white? I have looked and looked inside the envelope, but I can't nd the parents anywhere, not even their footprints in the snow. Please could you tell me what happened to them?

Thank you,

Abhi

January 5, -23

Dear Mr. Chappalwala,

I imagine you have reached the Caribbean by now. Had I your talent for letters, I would share my winter with you—it hunkers in this city in a blanket of smog so thick I can barely see the

NICE VISUAL / DICTION

streets from up high. Your long journey south through the western continents fills me with a strange dissatisfaction. I long for the old home, though I have tried hard these years to forget those days of warmth.

At any rate, I wanted to note that the release of your latest specimen caused quite a stir around the city. It moves me to critique your delivery in some detail. The instructions you placed within the outer envelope contained a couple of crucial errors. Surely, for example, you meant for us to "direct the mouth of the inner envelope away from the body" before lifting the flap?

I obtained the advised twenty-foot length of strong rope and went up to the roof with my children, as they had never seen such a specimen before. I opened the flap of the envelope and, before I knew what had happened, we were lofted into the upper branches of your bald cypress. We scabbled for holdfasts among the slender branches while, below, the city swung like a concrete hammock. As I watched our rope slither off a lower tree branch into the fathoms of the cypress roots, I considered writing you a letter, explaining the importance of specificity. Because I should have tied that rope to my waist before venturing into your tree.

My daughter and my youngest, perhaps the world is still new to them for, instead of searching for a way down the cypress, they clambered farther up and out into it. They were in its limbs for hours, hooting to each other as my eldest and I sought our way down.

We were still fifteen feet off the ground when we reached the lowest rungs of the cypress. I will pause to acknowledge that the tree you selected is, indeed, a magnificent specimen. Its trunk is as fluted as a champagne glass, the bark silver whale hide. It must be the last of its size, and I am glad it is now under my care. But this did not strike me then. I looked down into the roil of the tree-beast's roots, snagged into those distinctive stalagmites, and wondered if we would pierce ourselves upon them as easily as dinosaurs once did when they tried to climb up such trees in the past.

My eldest was impatient to be done with this adventure—he almost dashed himself to the ground in his haste to get down. I am grateful he suffered no injury. He disappeared downstairs, returned moments later with a poker from the replace to help stab and shove and stuff the whole tree, knot by knot, back down into its envelope. As soon as I was able to hop down from my branch, I took over for him. The heights of the tree, as the trunk tapered, were easier to pack away. My younger children were eventually shaken out of the upper branches and back onto the roof—they stood blinking like hatchlings thrown from the nest, their fingers tarred with cypress sap.

My daughter said there were fern gardens in the upper branches jeweled with small insects—that we had to climb back up to see. She looked so adamant, just like her mother, that my youngest, poor boy, looking back and forth between his sister's face and mine, started to cry. But I am not one to be swayed by tears or tantrums. It will not do to spoil these children more—they have lost so much already I hate to offer them any false sense that their lives as Mongerjis means what it once did. I continued to bend the cypress branches back into the envelope. By dawn, all that was left was to furl back the topmost twigs, the last pale leaf buds. I sealed the

IRREALISM ... GO HUNTER

STRONG
SIMILE

MAGNIFICENT VISUAL WORK HERE, HELPED BY MATTER-OF-FACT
DICTION

MORE
CHARACTERIZATION
- INT. TACTIC

envelope with tape, led it in the closet. I shall ask at the museum tomorrow if there is room somewhere to display a specimen so tall indoors.

You will find enclosed your payment, which you may note is smaller than it once was. I know your living is incumbent upon my support and, by way of apology, I remind you of our impoverished circumstances here. Take care to enclose better directions with your future dispatches, and to pick specimens easier to contain. This is, I fear, no longer a world for exhibitions of grandeur.

In humbled spirits,

Mr. Mongerji

AN ENTERTAINING SCENE... HOWE WHERE?

P.S. Just now the Mrs. informs me, rather briskly, that she had to escort the local police up to the roof to show them we had dismantled the tree in its entirety. She did manage to persuade them that the letter was private property, but we shall soon have to merge the Mongerji collection with the city's to ensure its continued survival.

September 2, —25

Dear Mr. Chappalwala-ji,

VOICE?

Ammi looked through my grade-four textbooks today and her (eyebrows became all one line) she was that angry. She asked me if I knew what an axolotl was. Then she asked me if I knew what lots of other animals were, and I didn't know any of their names, so she went to find Daddy and complained to him about my school and how I wasn't learning anything important there.

Now it's decided that when I return from school Ammi will take me through the cabinets in the downstairs big closet, the ones with all the amphibians first, next the ones with all the extinct birds.

But Ammi shouldn't worry, I think, because Jayu-dhidhi is already teaching me all sorts of things in secret about your letters. Today she showed me one that came from the last century, from your great-great-grandfather or something. Inside was a rotten fruit—something long and brown. I didn't think it was special—I wanted to see more axolotls like Ammi had shown me before dinner—but then Dhidhi gave me a magnifying glass, and we both lay on our stomachs with our heads right over the fruit and she pulled apart its flesh to show that there was a small fly in there, smaller than an apple seed. Its body was the color of a peacock, and its eyes were the color of gold, and it was laying tiny eggs between the skin of the fruit and the flesh. The eggs were long and white, and under the magnifying glass they looked like tightly closed flower buds.

I asked Dhidhi whether if we left the fruit outside the envelope the eggs would hatch, but she said that everything trapped inside the Chappalwala envelopes was like an axolotl—it would never really grow up. SMALL DRIPS OF THE RULES OF THE WORLD. AGAIN, DIRECTION

I know you are in Cameroon right now, and there are still forests there, so I was wondering, Mr. Chappalwala-ji, could you look for some more rotten fruit and send them to me and Dhidhi? She

won't ask you herself, because she doesn't like to talk to people she doesn't know, but both of us are very interested in your letters, and we learn a lot from searching inside them. If Ammi or Daddy catches us while exploring we will just say it's because we want to learn more than what they teach us at school. They don't have to know we're doing it just for fun.

Thank you,

Abhi

May 30, —26

Dear Farshad,

You do not know me, and my husband does not know this, but I once met you when you were no more than five. I must have been some 26 years old then, married less than a decade, and utterly entranced by you Chappalwalas.

I had visited your home, northeast, beyond the mountain pass. Yes, in your people's fashion, by letter. The air there was so clear I feared my own breath would pollute it. The ground sparkled with little flowers—I forget their name—that hung their lilac heads under weight of dew. I thought I would never return home.

Your father, if I knew him at all, was too discreet to have ever mentioned this story to you, and you will hardly remember my presence yourself. When introduced, you nodded your little head at me without ever meeting my eyes. You had just learned the trick of putting lizards into little greeting cards, and raced off into the woods beyond the village as soon as your father let go of your shoulder.

Nevertheless, I trust you now with the same discretion I came to expect from your father.

My reason for contacting you is to caution you. Since you are a full five years older than my oldest child, I expect you will act with maturity. I am aware you correspond with my younger children, and I know that your trinket specimens to them enrich their lives better than anything else this city can offer. My youngest, my bright star, flourishes in his knowledge of the natural world. He is the natural heir to the Mongerji collection, though my eldest is first entitled to it. My daughter is wild as grass seed, and if not for your portals into the world, she would run away, I am sure of it.

She is my blood, after all.

CHARACTERS ARE LEFT TO BUILD THEMSELVES IN THESE
DECLARATIONS. GOOD !! ~~B~~STRUCTURE

But do be careful as you indulge my children's requests. The Mongerjis have made their name in the world by asking of others, and we have fallen by asking too much. I do not wish my children to follow in the family's fate.

Sincerely,

Kavita Mongerji

HALF WAY AND WONDERING IF THIS STORY WILL MAKE SOMETHING MORE OF THE FRAME & CONSTRUCT OR IF THE VEHICLE WILL REMAIN JUST THAT

July 1, -27

Dear Mr. Chappalwala,

Have you any children? Do you take them on mini-expeditions with you to teach them your trade? How is it among you folk? For as long as I can remember, the Chappalwalas have collected for the Mongerjis, and I never thought to ask my own father how it was our relationship began.

I am attempting to convince my eldest that the great legacy that is our family's work must remain in our hands, even as we are employed and directed by city officials. It is difficult. He is on break from university and occasionally deigns to listen as I narrate the contents of each letter, specifying when and where they were delivered from, the conditions under which they may be opened. Sometimes he will gesture expansively out the window at the city below. He will say, "It's all for nothing, Father, just look where we live now."

I think the boy resents my employment, collaborating with the museum curators. He expected, I believe, to inherit my work, not my job. He remembers when the Mongerjis hosted galas in the old home, private exhibitions of specimens, immersive snapshots into distant worlds. Only some months before we lost our home to the rioters I had been coaching him to take our guests snorkeling in the coral ponds we had set up in the gardens. Ironic, that we never had a chance to show off those corals. They were to have been a retrospective, after all.

I sometimes envy my youngest one. He does not remember the old home, really. The vast fields, the conservatory, the many libraries budding off the main house. He was not yet four when the riots happened, has no memory of how he was passed, arm-over-shoulder, from handyman to gardener-wala to housemaid, down the bucket chain we made through the old escape tunnels for rescuing family valuables.

My daughter is sullen. Of course she must be groomed, as her mother was, for entry into someone else's home, but she resists such plans. Since the Mrs. is preoccupied with the education of our youngest, and I try as much as possible to expose the eldest to the museum, our poor middle child, I think, suffers. But I cannot take her to work with me. I fear that if she disappears in the museum archives—which are quite substantial, even without the addition of the Mongerji collection—I may never find her again. As it is, most evenings when I return from work I must retrieve her from somewhere inside the diminished family files. That is a task in itself—sometimes she won't even empty the envelopes out, instead she just climbs inside. Tell me, is this wise? I have never questioned your family's craft, but I worry, these days, as my daughter becomes increasingly entangled within the mechanics of your letters, whether she endangers herself. UNIVERSAL ISSUES. CONSTRUCT DOESN'T MATTER

She used to cry when I took crates of our letters—overstock, I started to call them—for transfer into the city museum. I believe she even stole some of those letters, but I have no way to prove

DICKENS
TO STOP

it, as I have never been able to find them on her person or in her room. She only ever seems to be in my study, or in the downstairs closet, exploring what little we still keep in the apartment.

Today I shook her out of your last dispatch, the liana humming with weaverbirds. She seemed to have no memory of what she had been doing in there. I ask her again and again why she goes to a place where she is as motionless, as unconscious as the words on this page, but she cannot, or will not, explain it. Perhaps it is like sleep to her—she always emerges as if wrenched from some dream. I sometimes wonder if you could deliver us something that would terrorize her, in order to cure her of her addiction.

I remain, a devoted father,

Mr. Mongerji

P.S. I would like to request, on the museum's behalf, some more showy examples of miniature homes within homes. The liana was a highlight of the summer exhibition, strung boldly against a blank wall of the museum. The public were thrilled to see the tiny beaks poke out of the weaverbird nests, the little ashes of yellow and black as the edglings tested out their wings—some even asked if it was clockwork.

A thought occurs—could we market postcard versions of some of the large displays at the gift shop? Perhaps some ornamental beetles, or flowers smaller than fingernails? As loath as I am to see Mongerji-like specimens in the hands of everyday folk, I must admit, this is the way the world is turning, is it not?

April 19, —28

Dear Mr. Chappalwala-ji,

Jayu-dhidhi is trying to discover your secret. Today, I received a small coin envelope in the mailbox addressed from our own apartment. I tried to shake out what was inside, but it was well stuck in there, so I had to hold the envelope open to my eye like it was a kaleidoscope.

Pressed to the inner seam was a plate of tree bark. On the bark was a small oval of lichen, a thumb-peel of orange skin, surface broken by tiny black cups. Along one of the walls of the envelope Dhidhi had scribbled, "The lichen is blooming!"

It was true—the cups would release spores that would stick to more tree bark and slowly new lichens would spread like slow-motion reworks across the tree. But that might be many years from now and, at any rate, the experiment failed. Dhidhi took me to see the tree from which the lichen had come, an oak in a city park. Now it has an ugly hole in it from where Dhidhi captured the lichen. It is bleeding from the wound. Dhidhi didn't want me to see, but I knew her eyes had tears in them when she saw what she had done.

Mr. Chappalwala-ji, I know it is rude to ask you your secrets, but could you send me a hint of how to make letters like you do? Dhidhi is trying very hard to prove to Daddy and Rohan-bhaiya that she can look after our collection as well as they can—maybe even better. After she

graduates this year, Daddy wants her to think about marrying, but I know she doesn't want to. If she could perfect your trick, Daddy might reconsider and let her stay. Nobody else can change his mind, not even Ammi, which is why Ammi never scolds Dhidhi anymore when she does something she shouldn't do, or goes somewhere she shouldn't go. I want to help Dhidhi too.

Can you help us?

Thank you,

Abhi

P.S. I have looked in the little envelope again, and the piece of tree bark just broke in two. I am sending it to you to hide it from Dhidhi.

June 25, —31

Farshad,

THE MRS. WAS A STRONG VOICE

Business first. My husband's weak health these months compels me to assist him in his letter writing. He would like to commend you for your current catches off the southeast coast of Africa. He is particularly amused by the electric blue sea slugs, although the museum is rather more interested in the jellies. They wonder if you might postpone your voyage to Socotra till after the midseason spawn. There is a market, they say, in selling juvenile specimens at the gift shop.

*MOST IDEAS
HAVE A
PAY OFF*

I would advise you to think carefully about this. The Mongerjris are not merchants, though my eldest is convinced otherwise. He is beginning to price the remains of the collection—your predecessors had the luxury of capturing herds, not single specimens, and he is convinced he can isolate individuals for private collectors. I know from experience that separating fragments from those letters is not easy, but he will not listen. No one in this family does.

*ENTROPY -
INEVITABLE*

At any rate, your original plan to reach the south seas off the Arabian Peninsula is a good one. Socotra must be exquisite at this time of year, the sun's blaze sending all but the hardiest of creatures into hiding. Your father once told me he spent four months on the archipelago in search of worm snakes. Perhaps you might confirm that there indeed are no more left on the islands. I trust you know the trick of carrying a snowpack letter into the desert? I was quite charmed when your father told me of this. *→ THESE THINGS PING INTEREST*

On to personal matters. I suspect you are aware of my daughter's attempts at delivering herself from the city to—I'm not sure where. Perhaps she wishes to escape to you, as I once attempted when I visited your father. If she does show up, would you reassure her that the unpleasant feeling of being caught in a loop will eventually wear off? When I visited your father, I could not stop rubbing my shoulders, as if for warmth. It was as if my body had been hypnotized into doing what it had remembered doing just as it stepped into the envelope.

I sent myself to your father in a peat bog. A square meter quadrant of mosses and ferns, it was, though I only remember the delicate plumes of vapor coming off it, just as high as my knees. The sample had been collected at dawn, the skin of the bog sweating kisses into the disappearing cold air of night. Your father was an artist. His specimens arrived as though they

RAYTAM

were caught in three-dimensional paintings of their landscape. I do not blame myself for falling in love. INT. CHAR MOMENT,

Your father was very kind. Once I had recovered enough, he introduced me to you, showed me his home, took me around the village to meet the rest of the Chappalwala clan. I met your mother. You have her face, I remember, eyes dark as cherries. Your father explained to me that the Chappalwalas are like skimming stones—you have traveled so much for so long, you cannot form connections to places or people anymore. That you gather together only because you understand each other's displacement—that under-the-skin feeling of being stuck, making the same gestures and decisions, even when you are in a new place, or when you return to an old place and nd everything changed.

Have you seen the round pit of bare rock on the west slope past your village where that little creek cuts through? Your father scooped it out. That was what he sent me back with. I keep that letter on my person always. I feel I need to return to that piece of slope more often these days than I did when my children were young. The grass is bent, and I imagine it is still just as warm from the heat of our bodies, lying side by side, saying goodbye.

I have no doubt that my daughter will attempt what I did. It is not my place to interfere with that choice. But please, if you send her back, or forward, send her with thoughts that are happier than sad. She has a particular affection for beetles. Perhaps distract her with one of those as you send her away. The feelings that linger when we reemerge from the envelopes are the ones we entered with, and I would not have her feel as bereft as I did when I came home.

Kavita

December 30, —32

My dear Mr. Chappalwala,

When I was thirteen, I came down with a case of chicken pox so severe I had to sleep in an armchair at night, so afraid was I of turning over in bed, popping open my skin in the process. My father, not normally given to demonstrations of affection, came into my room one evening waving a letter.

"From Mr. Chappalwala," he said, referring, of course, to your father. He crouched by my chair and opened the envelope, releasing a flock of river ducks into the room. I watched them fly back and forth over the floor, their webbed feet grazing the silk carpet, clawing for water. /

My father told me the river ducks came from Chiang Rai. He told me your father, old Chappalwala, had stood on the bank where the Mekong met the Ruak, where Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar rubbed anks like slumbering lizards. The sun rose over Laos, and the birds emerged from the reeds in Myanmar and flew straight across the watery confluence to Thailand. They flew right into your father's arms—he had an envelope stretched open, at the ready.

I often thought about those ducks from Chiang Rai. Were they not in fact Burmese river ducks—and of course, back then, it was Burma—paying a visit to Thailand? But then again, who was to say they were not seasonal birds, migrating from farther north or south, sojourning in the waters of the Golden Triangle before continuing elsewhere? And still, perhaps they were Laotian river ducks, for when they flew out of that envelope, their backs still flashed with bronze coins of sunrise, Laotian sunrise, and surely no one can argue with the sun's claim upon a creature, that soft light burned into its flesh.

Years passed, my father died, and the letter was misplaced—I believe stolen by one of the staff. I had long since given up any pretensions I could run the Mongerji house as my father had. I felt porous with lost memories. On the anniversary of my father's death, I wrote to old Chappalwala, begging him to return to Chiang Rai for more river ducks.

He was gone a month before a letter arrived. He explained that Chiang Rai had greatly changed. From his old spot, where the Mekong and Ruak converged, he could see the lurching frame of a casino, half built, for tourists to Laos. He himself had spent an informative couple of hours in the museum built on the Thai side of the Golden Triangle, documenting the migration routes of ancient opium traders.

Old Chappalwala befriended a woodworker, a small, middle-aged man who plied his trade under the corrugated tin awning of a shop with only three walls. The man claimed it was good business, selling scrap-wood sculptures to tourists wandering out of the museum, the new hotel, the river dock. Chappalwala said the woodworker remembered the river ducks from when he was young. He said they flew so thick across the water that its surface churned into foam. He said the last time he had seen a river duck was five years ago in an old woman's garden, a string tied to its foot and fastened to a mulberry bush.

I could not believe it. I crumpled your father's letter and flung it across the room. In desperation I picked up the envelope, its corners pulpy as cloth from travel, pried it open, and turned it over.

A number of small objects rattled out. I picked one up. A duck, carved from pale yellow wood. Attached to its tail was a pin with a rotating bead, three chicken feathers stuck into the bead like the blades of a propeller. To be hung in an open window, I suppose, so the wind would catch the feathers and make them turn. There were fifty wooden ducks in all. I enclose one in this letter for you.

I wonder, my dear young friend, if you might make the journey your father made. You are on the other side of the world, I know, but I am an old man now, more porous than ever. Could you find me the old woodworker? Could you send him to me? I am curious about him. I wonder, when he was a boy, whether he ever noticed, beneath the sunlight's dapples, what color the river ducks' back feathers were. I no longer remember.

Yours in earnest,

Mr. Mongerji

POV!!
BROWN

March 27, —33

Mr. F. Chappalwala,

You have no doubt heard, by now, of my late father's passing, since at least one of my siblings writes to you quite frequently. I have no comment on what the other one does, or even where she is. I wonder if she even knows our father is dead.

I will be brief, as others in my family have not been. As the new head of the Mongerji line, I hereby dissolve the contract between my family and the Chappalwalas. We have no need for your work, as the collection we have amassed no longer carries the currency it once did. I thank your family for their generations of service to us.

On a personal note, do I ask for too much if I request that you cease communications with what remains of my family? They are far too much in thrall with acquisition—as if collecting pieces of the world will help them understand their place in it better. They would do better to be released from the influence of your letters. It seems when you are not peddling plants and animals you fleece us of our hopes. No more, please. Let us be.

Sincerely,

R. Mongerji

June 15, —33

Dear Farshad-bhaiya,

Please find enclosed the latest of the Mongerji collection, the last of what remained in the house. Tomorrow I go to work for the first time with my brother. It will be a while before I have access to the collection archived within the museum, but I am letting you know now so you can remain on standby. The museum will not be long in discovering what I plan to do. Expect one or two fat manila envelopes, and when you receive them, please clear a wide berth around you and open the flaps of the envelopes away from your body.

I almost wish I could be there to see the explosion. All the collection—hundreds and hundreds of years of hard work, so many yellowed envelopes. It makes me chuckle even now.

I have been meaning to ask you—how strong are your muscles? Before Jayu-dhidhi left, she put a whole rat into a letter, and I watched her heave the slim sheet of paper to the mailbox like it was attached to a dragnet filled with whales. It must be so much effort to consider and consider and consider every minuscule little detail of the creatures you capture, to hold all of their intricacies so they stay intact on their journeys. Dhidhi told me things about the rat I would never have known—about the dirt caught between the grooves of its nails, the microfauna within its guts. She said the last thing the rat had eaten was the stub of a pear and its stem. She said it took her five hours of considering to figure that out.

I cannot imagine how heavy the rest of the collection is, and would appreciate any advice you have to offer. If the deliveries are successful, Ammi has agreed to send me to where you and Dhidhi are, though I think Dhidhi must be off somewhere else again—she could never stay still. I

asked if Ammi would want to come with me, but she says she has a letter of her own, and will be quite satisfied with where it takes her.

Meanwhile, the next time Dhidhi breezes through to post something, would you tell her to stop? I really like the beetles she's been sending, but the whole point is to return them now, isn't it? When I leave, I want to travel light, and I have beetles from 20 different places in my pocket already—my wallet almost won't close. Just tell her to describe them to me next time.

Thank you,

Abhi

Geetha Iyer was born in India and grew up in the United Arab Emirates. She received an MFA in Creative Writing and Environment from Iowa State University. Her fiction and poetry has appeared in journals including *Gulf Coast*, *Ninth Letter*, *The Missouri Review Online*, and *Mid-American Review*. She's been the recipient of the James Wright Poetry Award, the Calvino Prize, and the Gulf Coast Fiction Prize, and has attended the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. She lives in Panama City, Panama.