

**LBRIS**

We know  
books

TRANSLATED BY

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**samādhī**

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1. A state of deep meditation; a trance; the final stage of yoga.
2. Self-immolation of an ascetic by entombment.
3. Place of entombment, especially of a saintly personage, or one who has died heroically.

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## **PART ONE**

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**MA'S BACK**

1.

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A tale tells itself. It can be complete, but also incomplete, the way all tales are. This particular tale has a border and women who come and go as they please. Once you've got women and a border, a story can write itself. Even women on their own are enough. Women are stories in themselves, full of stirrings and whisperings that float on the wind, that bend with each blade of grass. The setting sun gathers fragments of tales and fashions them into glowing lanterns that hang suspended from clouds. These too will join our story. The story's path unfurls, not knowing where it will stop, tacking to the right and left, twisting and turning, allowing anything and everything to join in the narration. It will emerge from within a volcano, swelling silently as the past boils forth into the present, bringing steam, embers, and smoke.

There are two women in this story. Besides these women, there are others who came and went, those who kept coming and going, those who always stayed but weren't as important, and those yet to be mentioned, who weren't women at all. For now, let's just say that two women were important, and of these, one was growing smaller, and the other bigger.

There were two women and one death.

Two women, one death. How nicely we'll get on, us and them, once we all sit down together!

Two women: one mother, one daughter, one growing downwards, the other growing upwards. One laughs and says, I'm growing smaller by the day! The other is saddened, but says nothing when she sees herself growing bigger. The mother has stopped wearing saris now that she must stuff more than half the fabric into her waist and raise the hems of her petticoats a little higher each day. Does gradually growing smaller make you catlike, so you may slip through tiny cracks and escape? Puncture a border and slip right through? Develop a knack for near-invisibility?

This must be the reason that the mother was able to slip through to the other side of the border while the daughter was still fretting over how stuck they were. It's also possible that the smaller woman truly was innocent when she refused to confess to any crime on her part, be it regarding legal permissions, debates over names, or accusations of theft.

Those who didn't understand her arguments considered her crazy, maybe even vicious. They suspected her of purposefully misleading.

She pointed out that men always get the high-quality dal and women just get leftover mash, don't they? Hmm? She spoke fearlessly. So? So does that make it right?

But if you stare at them fearlessly, will the border guards understand? You have crossed the border, they reprimand.

She chuckles. Anything worth doing transcends borders. Should I do nothing at all?

No, they retort, and no one is foolish enough not to know this. Even goats and cows know where not to stray. And your eyesight isn't so bad you can't see, so how can you be forgiven?

Who's asking for forgiveness! She roars with laughter and the growing-bigger daughter weeps. And is this all there is to see? Perhaps I too have seen a thing or two. Try seeing with my eyes for once.

If she were to fall, she did not wish for it to be facedown. Wherever the bullet came from, wherever it hit, she would fall straight back and lie supine on the ground. Regally. Her eyes filled with sky.

Let me practise, she'd tell her daughter.

The mother had started hiccupping all the time. She hiccupped and hiccupped and hiccupped. If the daughter had not been in such a state, she'd have grown suspicious as to whether these hiccups were real or fake. They won't stop with water; give me a slap on the back! the mother would command. If the slap isn't hard enough, then try a running kick, boom! Try it on my back or in my stomach or on my sides, and make sure I fall down, but on my back, eyes open, forehead facing up; then the hiccups will surely stop. It was a strange remedy, but the daughter did as the mother asked. She kicked and kicked, *boom boom boom*, and with this new game her mother kept falling over *bam bam bam*. After a bit of hullabaloo, observers would also burst out laughing—Can you beat it? This old lady's too much! But the mother told the daughter that she needed to be prepared.

Anyway, long story short, what happened was this: a bullet did come flying towards her, but by then the mother had become an expert at falling backwards. A bullet came, punctured her body, shot through and out the other side. Anyone else would have sprawled facedown in the mud, but Ma flipped backwards like she was doing a somersault. She lay back on the ground in an attitude of victory, elegantly,

faceup, as though she was reclining on a soft bed, the sky her coverlet.

Those who consider death to be an ending took this to be hers. But those in the know knew that this was no ending; knew she'd simply crossed yet another border.

So there's no harm in starting the story right here, that is, the way we're doing it right now.



2.

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Before all this there'd already been one death. That of a man, whose wife refused to lift herself up with his cane. This man was the husband of this same mother and the father of this same daughter. His presence was still felt, even in death. But regardless of whether or not he had died, it seemed his widow certainly had. At least that's how she looked as she lay in her room.

*Their* room. In a corner of the house. *Their* bed. In winter. Thick quilt. Hot-water bottle. Woollen cap. The cane still hanging from its hook. The cup still sitting on the teapoy by the bed, with no water in it. When he was alive, this was where he placed his teeth at night. In the morning, he'd reach first for the teeth, then for the cane.

Outside, tooth-chattering cold; inside, Ma, teeth a-chatter.

She was a bundle, shrinking ever more from moment to moment, sending out a scrambled signal from within her vast quilt that she was still in there somewhere. The bundle scrunched-up on one side, then slid up a bit, then down, then over there. Was she testing to see how far she could spread herself? Or was she just turning her face away, turning her back on her children and grandchildren, and in the process dragging herself towards the wall to press against it with all

her few-years-shy-of-eighty might to see if she could slip into it entirely?

The wall plays a special role in our story. (As do the doors, since you use them to get from one side to another, from here to there, on and on through the centuries, from forever to forever).

It's not an unusual wall. No special artistic features. Not a Thar desert wall studded with tiny mirrors, or a wall covered with a collaged design of rocky peaks or some such, with different shapes and colours, or spangled with tinsel garlands and printed with designs for a wedding; nor was it seized with a duplicitous desire in the sweep of modernity to appear old while being new, nor eager to trick our eyes into seeing a plastic wall as mud-plastered, bristling with fake grasses, or set with a mosaic pattern in smooth marble; nor still was it an awesome, colourful, tall, shiny orange-blue-green wall made by multinationals that would never fade or scratch or peel, imperishable, immortal, enduring.

It was just a simple brick-and-cement wall—a yellowing, whitewashed, middle-class wall, holding the ceiling, floor, window, and door together, with a network of pipes, wires, and cables arrayed within, enfolding the entire home in its wallfulness.

This was the sort of wall towards which Ma, now just this side of eighty, was sliding, gradually. A cold wall, during those winter days, and riddled with cracks, the way ordinary walls can be.

What can never be known for certain was whether the wall was playing the greater role in pulling Ma towards it, or whether it was her own desire to show her back to her family

that drew her in. Ma just kept getting closer and closer to the wall, and her back became a wall itself, keeping at bay those who came to coax and cajole: Get up, Ma, Get up!

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**3.**

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No, I won't get up, no getting up, not now, the bundle wrapped in the quilt mumbled. No, no, not now, not getting up.

These words alarmed them, and her children grew more insistent. They were afraid. Oh! Our dear mother! Papa's gone and he's taken her with him!

Stop sleeping so much, please get up.

She keeps sleeping. She just lies there. Eyes closed. Back to them. They whisper.

When Papa was alive, she had put her all into looking after him. She was alert, at the ready, no matter how tired. Busy getting ground to a pulp; very much alive. Irritable, upset, coping, faltering, breathing breath after breath after breath.

Everyone's breath flowed through her, and she breathed everyone's breath.

And now she's saying she won't get up. As though Papa was her only reason for living. Now he's gone, has her reason too?

No, Ma, no, the children insisted, look outside, the sun is shining, get up, pick up the cane, it's hanging right here, try some roasted rice, it has peas in it. Maybe she has loose motions, give her a digestive powder!

No, I will nooooot. No, nyo, nyooo, Ma mewls.