

Dead Letters

Once a year or so, when nothing else
seems to inspire me,
flip through my mother's and father's
handwritten letters,
father's in educated English,
mother's in Kannada, her mother tongue.

My father's letters are polite with a slight edge
or understatement to serve the occasion,
leading me to conclusions he wished that I should draw.

In one he writes—
yesterday while getting out of the car, I fell,
your doctor sister took care of me,
prescribed bed rest and painkillers,
I'll not be able to walk for weeks,
but no need to worry in such a far away place,
I must take care, walk with help
so hard to find these days. Be well.

My mother's are all direct assaults—
I've grown inexorably sad without you,
of all my sons, you were special,
but you've forsaken me,
I must've done something terrible
to deserve such a curse.

I read them time and again,
father's circumstance and mother's barrage,
for I too have children growing busily away,
need space to stack up against
the inevitable gaps and holes they'll create.

So I try to throw away the letters of the dead,
telling myself that one or two saved
is enough of their nagging selves.

Then I see in my father's writing the unsaid,
scripted curves holding back despair,
in my mother's ink—hesitant scribble the thought
scanning the shape of a slow alphabet,
as if she shook the pen to squeeze more
to run like rain in a gully of drought.

put the letters back in the drawer,
think of the time they led me,
my childish flank scraping against his stride,
my hand flirting with her silken palm,
across the streets with words lived for.

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