I misunderstand you

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A sound piece recorded and edited by the author.[1]

We listen each day as a dying person. Sound creates life, curation of self that removes and brings back the familiar, I misunderstand you is a collaboration with mothers not living. I'm interested in the spectacle of how her sound creates an experience and erases the living. If not the answers to my questions, then what's the power in a voice, timbre, throatiness, rambling, different registers of time.

Amma never says she's stressed out––she hardly ever says she's sad, and never says she's depressed. I don't remember her ever expressing in words that she's angry. When I ask, "how are you?" – her typical response is, "can't complain." To complain is a fundamental part of the culture where I live now, in midwest USA; much of my training is how to persuasively complain. I'm afraid if I speak about Amma in this way, people might view her lack of verbally expressing her negative feelings as backwards. Amma has a habit of happiness that leads her to not speak clearly about things, she invites me into disruptively sarcastic spaces. She never speaks about trauma or abuse. Her method of narration avoids 21st century packages of stories, in which we accumulate trauma in the first part of life and spend the second part of life processing, naming, and exposing it. As I insist on circling back to questions of trauma, trying to locate *her* trauma, I never find it.

In literary terms I would describe her boundaries as rhizomatic, a non-linear structure that connects any point to any other point. Clearly stating and sticking with boundaries is an obsession where I live. The conversation about trauma and boundaries doesn't take into account that in many cases people and entities set up alienating boundaries for Amma. She had to cross a boundary when she moved to the USA, and applied for citizenship. She has had to cross numerous boundaries to fight back against traditional culture in both the USA and India. On a summertime trip to India, my wife asked what her wardrobe should be, to which Appa suggested she dress more conservatively. I remember Amma's words: "You're a white European. You can wear sleeveless shirts. They'll give you a pass." One of

the boundaries I had to cross was speaking up about my mental health – transgressing the taboo in our family – that discussion of feelings and mental health was a clear boundary, and she crossed that boundary with me. Sometimes the rhizomatic boundaries backfired: Amma found it acceptable to read the journals I wrote as a teenager when she thought I was in mental distress. While I state my boundaries and support people who have boundaries, I'm also suspicious of them. Boundaries for whom – for the rich and powerful, for the gate keepers? When people are in positions of power over me and create boundaries to preserve a racist and toxic status quo, Amma taught me to cross them. As a POC artist, how many times have I had to cross someone's boundaries around topics of discomfort just to make my voice heard? Even to marry someone outside of an Indian community is a boundary to cross.

The United States is founded on a blood boundary, the one-drop rule. The one-drop rule asserts that any person with even one ancestor of black ancestry is considered black. Boundaries cannot be universal because of systemic racism and social inequalities. Maybe boundaries have to do with bodily frame. What are the assumptions, understandings, and misunderstandings of the body? I change my mind a lot about things, I misunderstand more than I understand.

She used to wake up early in the morning for prayer to the deity, a mother goddess, and offer prayers in the evening. These moments where she would partly close the door, I wouldn't be allowed to disturb. She was happy when I was in the room, or if I used the table to study in the room she would walk around me, my body did not interrupt her, it was my need to understand or misunderstand that she did not allow. Mothers are in interruption except when in prayer.

For most of her life Amma was a pediatric nurse who worked with terminally ill children. I remember once she wanted to adopt one of the kids. "Jackie wants to come home with us." I recall that Jackie was born with Gastroschisis or something similar – a baby with her intestines born outside of her body. The doctors had surgically operated, but Jackie still had problems and had to constantly return to the hospital. Out of hundreds of children Amma cared for in the ICU, she spoke about Jackie the most. She was consumed with the thought of something you were supposed to have born inside of a human body, on the outside of a body. Jackie's illness struck me as the emotional illness of an immigrant family, trying to keep things inside, putting back things that spilled outside back in. In my art practice I keep putting experiences on the outside, sometimes I go too loud and lose my voice.

I'm interested in how the sounds of Amma relate to past memories. I'm less interested in producing new recordings because memory is already full; I need an opportunity to sift through, curate, arrange, shape, cut away – to do what I do when nobody tells me what to do. To see things, to listen, to taste; a safe place to suspend judgment.

Since Amma passed away last summer, I've been practicing avoiding grief. Sometimes when I share my writing, listening, and videos with people, they say I am giving them access, that the work is intimate. What kind of intimacy? When I listen to my mother's voice there is intimacy and distance.

Grief is my mother not saying things clearly – I listen to some of the last recordings of my mother where I ask her questions. My role is to listen not to comprehend but hold space, to create that space, to witness, not what she likes to eat, but the snacks she chooses, brands she asks me to bring her like Janaki's thattai, some undying sound. She would call and chat for long periods of time, where my only response was mmm or hmmm; I almost never get a word in.

What was frustrating was the circularity of the conversations, she would start to tell me what she had for breakfast, then jump to the gardener's visit, then to something Appa said, then to a story about a neighbor, then back to food, and then some shopping she wanted to do; the whole effect, postmodern satire. At the very end, she would give me space to talk, but so much time had elapsed that I almost never shared anything. Maybe boundaries are more like membranes, during my attempts at a Q&A with her I soak in the way she speaks which avoids my attempts to document her, make her story palpable. Instead I'm reminded that I passed through her body when I was born, why shouldn't language be no more than series of beats in consciousness, something she creates which transcends the realities of our life.

The unknowability of strawberry ice cream. In the last few months of her life, I interview her, want to take a crack again at making some connections to her childhood, her choices in life, her relationship to the mother goddess which felt ritualized for me. At the end of the interview, I ask her what she likes to have for dinner, a repetitive conversation that's not about what she likes. When she is dying and the doctor tells our family to feed her ice cream and protein shakes, there is a great discussion about what flavor ice cream and protein shakes to buy. Amma says she doesn't care, or gives conflicting answers, until my cousin Sitha, the holder of family stories, arrives on the scene. "I know the answer, Amma likes strawberry, she orders strawberry ice cream when there's a choice." So we buy crates of strawberry flavored protein shakes, and tubs of strawberry ice cream. After a few days Amma says she actually doesn't like strawberry ice cream. But why do you always order it when we go out? I just used to ask for strawberry ice cream because no one else was eating it. After Amma dies crates of strawberry shake remain unconsumed, a laugh at our attempts for capitalist hoarding of pleasure and care.

The culture I live in now encourages promoting my own opinion, my own likes and desires; the algorithm knows my preferences and feeds me coupons – the fact that all these years Amma consumed an ice cream flavor that she was at best indifferent to strikes me as a resistance to being known.

Despite her sitting down, and patiently answering all my questions, I ultimately never got to really know her. She showed me the inability to actually know someone. Something about this passage about Roland Barthes made me think how as a translator I interact with Amma, my desire to lie down beside her when she's sick and conduct this interview, my impulse to clarify her responses, my relationship to my inner and outer world and thinking that Amma struggled with a conflict between her inner and outer world the way I did. Kate Briggs writes about translation and the unknowable:

> 'It's not true that the more you love, the better you understand,' writes Barthes in A Lover's Discourse, translated by Richard Howard, under the heading 'The Unknowable.' '[A]ll that the action of love obtains from me is this wisdom.' Then, in the next paragraph: 'Or again, instead of trying to define the other ('What is he?'), I turn to myself: 'What do I want, wanting to know you?' What would happen if I decided to define you as a force and not a person? And I were to situate myself as another force confronting yours?' (2021, 85).

Exploiting the technology of cameras and microphones to capture her to the best of my ability satisfied my base anthropological need to archive her, but she slyly turned technology into something that also protects intimacy. The codes and meanings are her artistic curation of self that confounds technological data. Now that Amma left, how will I gather up her content? It's more a sense of her not there which will be out there and exclusively her. When I leave this world, I leave behind my digital opinions which are probably not mine to begin with.

An artifact from the first quarter of the 21st century, something Amma played with surprising regularity, the computer game Angry Birds. She would goad Appa and ask him to play too. "Why angry, I'm not angry," he responds. While generally a good father, he had a temper, so Amma plays Angry Birds and Appa pretends he's not angry. In the larger arena that plays out in the weaponization of children to fight on the sides of adults, she hurls baby birds to knock down oppressive structures.

Time exists differently when there is only sound. Most Hindu people say that the universe starts with sound, not light. Sound is all mixed up for me; mixed up with Yoga class in the USA. Amma fights against the demon and is the demon. She relishes insight and delusion, a line of muruku as a constellation, rituals of agonizing repetition. The Hindu god, Shiva, famously saw no point in having offspring, to which his consort Parvati says, "children are needed to receive and give love." Appa is mostly about how to do the yagna at all costs. His attitude sometimes similar to Shiva's: nobody needs food, cooking is an afterthought. In this version of the story Amma doesn't leave, though in the ancient story Parvati leaves Shiva and sets up a kitchen somewhere else.

Sometimes I think I should add something to the audio, some explanatory or historical addendums, something that would increase the accessibility of the

audio. But as a translator I cannot simply add something, within the collaboration of a translator there exists something else a changing, replacing, a different kind of receiving.

> I'm never simply making something up but I am nevertheless making something (something new in the name of againness). I accept this peculiar writing scenario – I willingly accept it. Although I don't think it would be true to say that I accept or have ever accepted it once and for all. I don't think I could claim to be capable of accepting this and my acceptance holding once and for all… translation as 'a practice of acceptance': an ongoing practice of acceptance, an ongoing rethinking, readjusting and reaccepting the terms of my acceptance (Briggs 2021, 134).

One Sunday when I'm in high school, Amma prepares pancakes for me. She waits until I start eating and asks, "Who is Melanie?"

"Where did you find that name?"

"It's in your journal."

Melanie shares a locker next to mine, we exchange letters and song lyrics, I write about our meetings with fascination. It's a name like pancakes I don't think much about anymore.

I withhold my anger about the invasion of privacy and try to explain to Amma who Melanie is. My explanation makes her out to be some educational prodigy, which is not what I intended. She listens patiently – then out of nowhere, "be careful of the girls." In the present, I scroll through the news and find men and boys who behave inappropriately, shoot guns, commit criminal acts. I don't have anyone in my life who talks to me this way. Be careful of the girls... possessiveness. Would I say this to my son? With increasing frequency, I am the only cis straight male in white art spaces. I introduce myself, and also learn from Amma how to not exist in these boundaries. She contradicts boom culture, the way a history is put together. Wind power is booming, translation is going through a boom, everybody lies to you except your mother, unless it's your own mother. Without her I might lose my capacity to notice many other things are beautiful, many other things are torture, someone who draws me out of my preferred modes of existence.

Notes

[1] This piece includes an excerpts from a recording of a Devi Kavacham *stotram* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXTuvg1tMP8): https://drive.google.com/file/d/1L7_Wqg92GbXdIPYqF4A0kWzfXc9xnCxC/preview

References

Briggs, K. 2021. *This little art*. London, United Kingdom: Fitzcarraldo Editions.