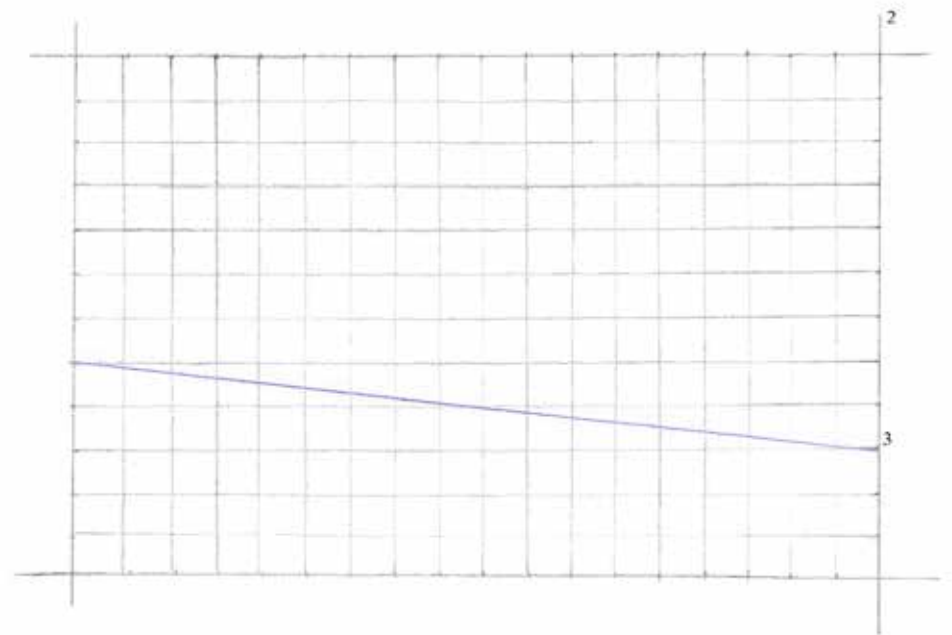
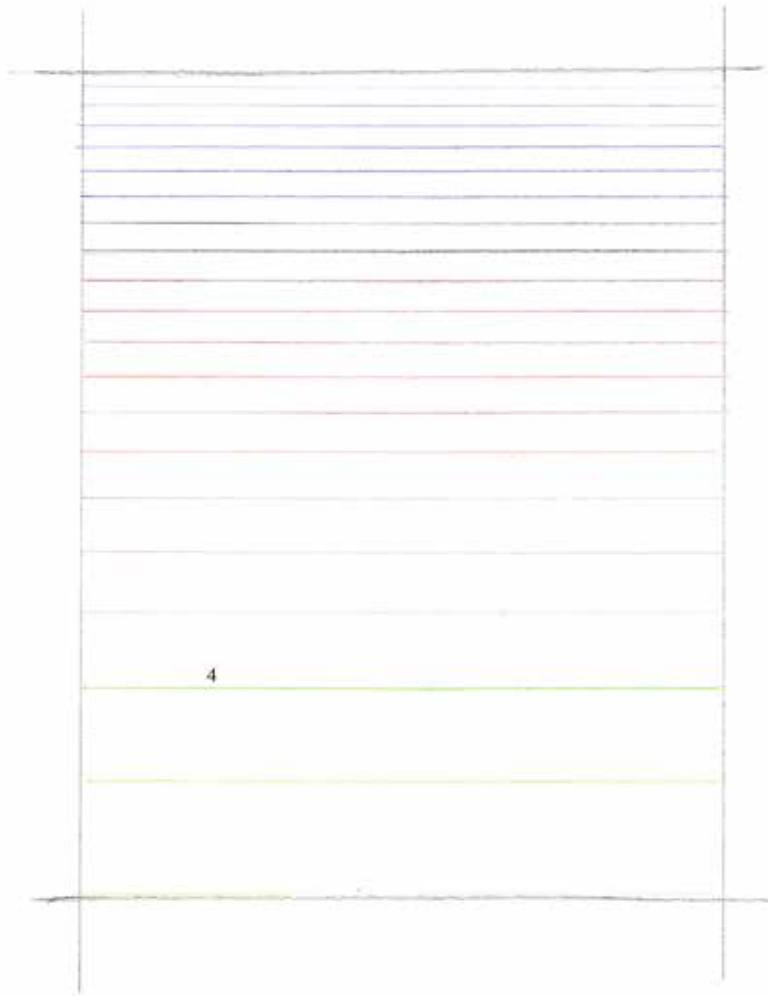


End Notes: Unearthing Jehanara

Fazal Rizvi

1933 – 1997

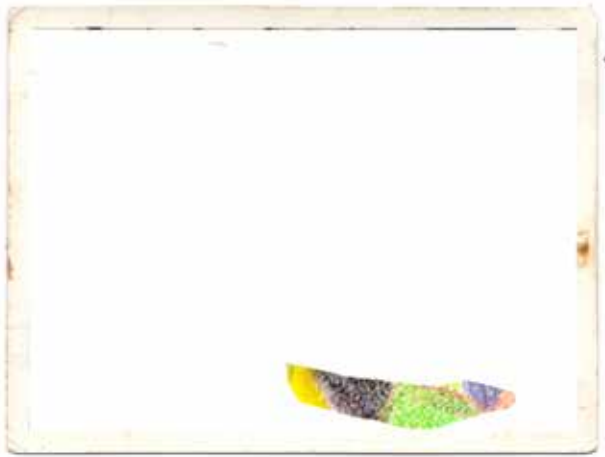






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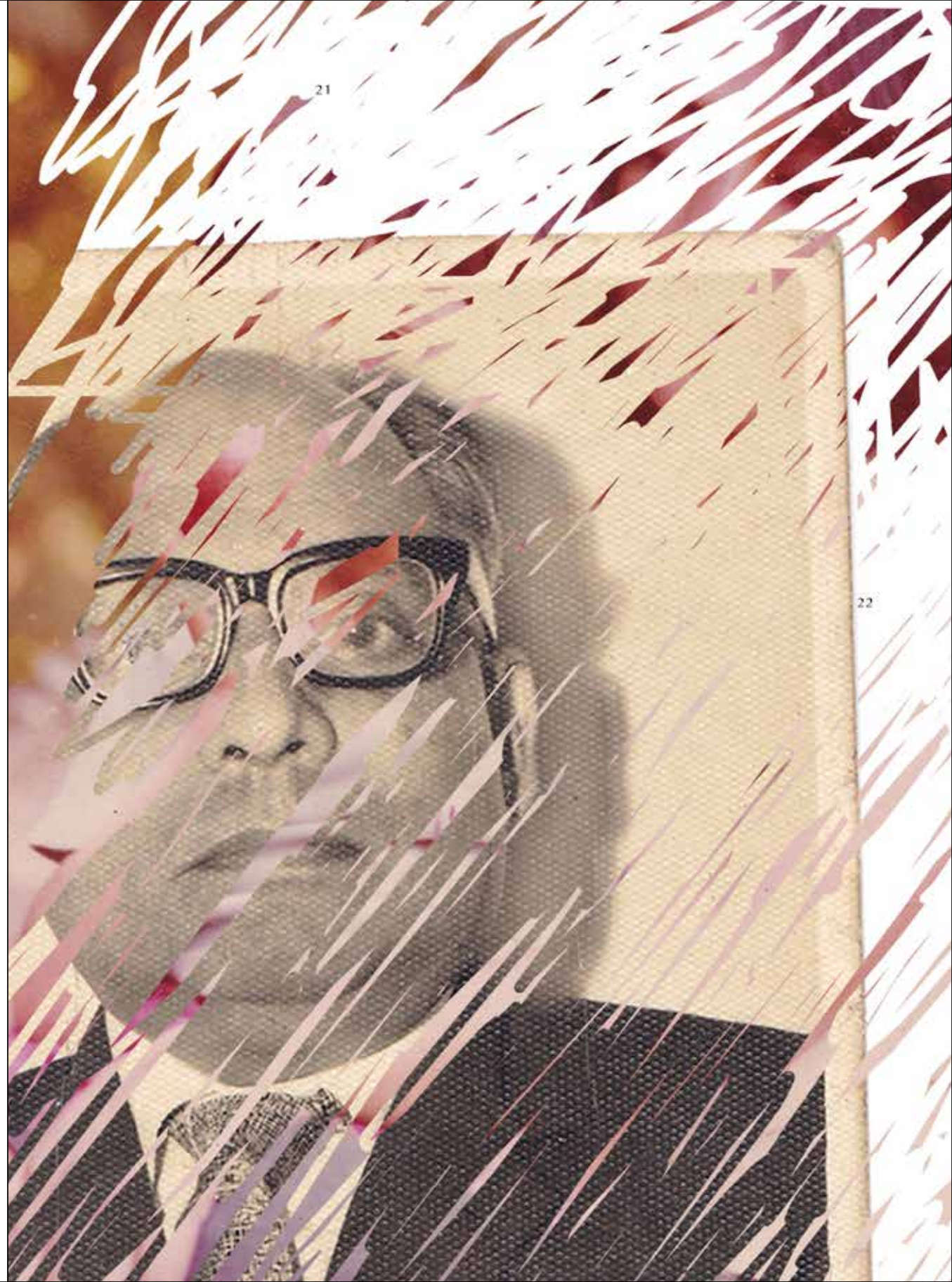


13





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24



1

What does memory look like? What is its nature? Can you picture it? Can you give it a colour? A name? Can you assess its order? Or disorder? Will you ever be able to tell how it all piles up inside you? But then, does it really pile, you start to wonder.

2

Does it have a shape? Perhaps something recognisable or relatable, with a system of sorts. Maybe it has a structured form. I am imagining rows upon rows, decks upon decks of archived and documented moments, anecdotes, emotions....

3

Maybe it has a linear form like life itself. Moving along from birth towards its eventual death. But does it only constitute of moments and things we can remember and recall? Would one ever remember as far back as being born...as you come out of your mother's womb? Do you remember the cutting of the chord then? Or was that an instant that was not recorded, or we just don't have the capacity/ability to unearth things from that far back and deep. Similarly, would a brain remember much once you and I die? Would it contain all that it has collected over a span of a life, post life itself? So what is the nature of this archive? Maybe it is ephemeral like all life around us. And maybe it only lasts as long as we do.

4

Is it fields of colour? Fields upon fields within fields beyond fields. Fields that you have laid on, that you have played on. Fields where you have been merry and fields where you may have bled. All those places and those spaces that you have lived on and lived through, are those what make up these memory fields?

5

Or is it a patchwork of fragments? Fragments of time and place, carefully sewn together. But then if it is really like a patchworked quilt, we still know not which fragment gets to be sewn with which. Or maybe they are all free to associate and disassociate upon their liking.

6

And what when these quilts get torn or they wear out?

7

What about the fragility of memory itself? It is an archive more fragile than all the ones made by man. The body often tends to survive it.

8

But do tell me, what is the life of a photograph? It is paper too at the end of the day and it is way more fragile than you and I will ever be. Do you think it would last a day were it not protected within the sleeves of those albums that you hold so dear? They too tear and crumble with time. And lose colour too. And when they fade or dissolve, they obscure the only moment which they were meant to embody and preserve within them. Though from time to time they do help us traverse through territory that we once knew, or at least they make us think that we knew them well. But with one little tear, it can all be lost. But despite this described fragility, they tend to outlive most of us.

9

Photographs are framed. They in fact *are* frames. They have edges that contain and limit them. We know not what lies beyond them, but we can imagine and speculate to our liking and abilities. These edges can often be sharp and incisive; thus, they do not give all that much away. What a photograph contains is a selected, framed, and an imprisoned moment. A fragment. A splinter of time. A flash into and onto a life. A flash that lights up the frame. A flash that casts shadows where you cannot see. A flash that too has edges and limits. And a flash that can often blind its subjects. Even if momentarily so.

10

This blinding and illumination happens simultaneously. We live in a time when photographs are given much merit. Our lives are constantly documented and catalogued. However, it is important to remember that these are often carefully designed and curated instances. They are mostly staged in fact. And what such documents may reveal may prove to be novel at times, but what about all that they don't reveal? What they choose to omit. And erase. And ignore. What of all that? Who accounts for what is lost and all that is not captured on film. Who would fill in those gaps and how? More importantly who creates these gaps?

11

Also, what is this tool? A tool that helps erase and set things right. But it only sets things right for the ones with the controls. They can obliterate and change histories to their liking and need. But it is much worse when they mercilessly erase people.

12

What about when people wither away with time? Sometimes bits, and sometimes their whole selves fade, and are forgotten. You may be able to look straight into their eye, those pupils may even dilate, and you may try your luck to create a mirror to their lives in those moments when you see a reflection of your own self, glaring back at you, but from them you will only get hollow and blank stares.

13

Erasure is not always caused by an external force.

14

My maternal grandmother, Jehanara Hasan, was born in Bihar, India, and moved with her family to East Pakistan in 1947. There is not much that I have known about her. I did get to see her, but only in a state of dementia—where both her mind and body were slowly and steadily disintegrating right before my eyes. That is the only way I saw her. Breathing, but decaying. Her mind collapsing and shutting down. Years and years of life and acquired knowledge shutting down slowly and sometimes too abruptly. Though to be honest, I never really got to know what it was shutting down from. I do not know what she was like in her prime. All I have are some stories.

15

Stories of her breathtaking beauty. Why is it that mostly only such stories are remembered with the most vivid of descriptions?

16

More than the stories, photographs of her survive as a testament to all such claims.

17

"Photographs instigate, confirm, seal legends. Seen through photographs, people become icons of themselves. Photography converts the world itself into a department store or museum-without-walls in which every subject is depreciated into an article of consumption, promoted into an item for esthetic appreciation.

"Photography also converts the whole world into a cemetery. Photographers, connoisseurs of beauty, are also—wittingly or unwittingly—the recording-angels of death. The photograph-as-photograph shows death. More than that, it shows the sex-appeal of death."¹

18

Did she remember then how beautiful she was once? Was she able to confront her own reflection in the mirror? Did she recognise herself?

19

I wonder if a mere photograph would have helped her remember who she once was, and where and how. I wonder if she could look at her captured self and just learn to imitate that image. The image that to all around her was truly a representation of her. Of the beautiful Jehanara. After all the Jehanara that once was, was rendered eternal within the confines of this image. An

image that imitated the real—the truth. They say an image represents the truth most truthfully. No? And a beautiful one, even more so.

20

But why must we remember? What is the value of that? The notion of forgetting has such little merit in the ways of this world. Just pause for a second and think, that perhaps forgetting is just as natural to life as the act of remembering and reminiscing.

21

I have been told that in the early onset of her disorder, Jehanara, started to forget all the people who were close to her. She started forgetting their names. She was unable to put a name to a face that had been around her for years. A recurring happening in those days was when she would mistake my maternal uncle (*khalu*) to be her husband Mehmood Hasan, whenever he would return from work. She was projecting memories of a man she had lost more than thirty years ago onto another man, onto another body of flesh and bones.

22

Was she forgetting in order to remember and hold on to the only man she had lost so many years ago, and so far away? Or perhaps one can say that she was battling with her memories, and it is clear which ones she wanted to hold on to more. (My maternal grandfather died in East Pakistan—before the family moved to West Pakistan in 1970—amidst riots that led to the Independence of Bangladesh).

23

One of the stories most graciously narrated about her is how when she had started showing strong signs of dementia and had stopped recognising people and was losing track of most of her daily functions, she would still lay down her prayer mat at the time of the respective prayer and would often only just sit on it. At other times, she would perform some actions, and then would wrap up her mat and continue living her otherwise unstructured and uninformed life. This act of praying, to people around her, was the last reminder of some order and remembrance of a life she once lived.

24

Her daughters talk about this act of hers with much pride. They don't know whether or not she was actually praying, but to just see her re-enact something that she had performed all her life gave them some strength. To them it was not about the structured routine of life. Nor was it about the body and its fragments and tissues remembering an act that they had been conditioned to repeat even when the brain remembered not enough. To them it was a sign. A sign that gave them hope amidst the slow dimming of this light.

Notes

- 1 . Peter Hujar, *Portraits in Life and Death*, with an Introduction by Susan Sontag (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), p. 7.