Leaving No Remains: 
Death among the Bengalis in 
Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction

"It might have been your child but this was not the case. We had been careful, and you had left nothing behind." Thus ends "Going Ashore," the last story in Jhumpa Lahiri's 2008 short story collection, Unaccustomed Earth. The scene: a woman in bed, speechless, spending the "cold, dark days" of yet "another winter in Massachussetts" but "burning with [the] new life" that has resulted from the consummation of her recent arranged marriage (Unaccustomed, 333). She is mourning the death of a previous lover who, unknown to her, finds his watery grave in the tsunami that hit southern India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand in December 2004. The entire story so far has been narrated in a third-person omniscient voice, but in the last one-and-a-half pages, the woman addresses her lover, in the first person. She has not needed the New York Times' obituary to be informed of his death: "By then I needed no proof of your absence from the world; I felt it as plainly and implacably as the cells that were gathering and shaping themselves in my body" (Unaccustomed, 333). Death and birth, loss and gain, mourning and celebration—the eternal cycle of life is articulated in the oft-performed gestural sweep of grief in the story, the last in a set of three interlinked narratives under the
title “Hema and Kaushik,” the second part of Unaccustomed Earth. In the
direct interpellation of the “you” with her readers (thereby resuscitating the
“dead” reader), Lahiri not only makes the death scene a site of renewed sig-
nification for migrants paralyzed by the visceral and metaphysical horror of
“dying in a strange country” but also suggests a more profoundly political
ethics of mourning and a poetics of remembrance for our contemporary
humanity.

Lahiri attends to the particular, and secular, condition of modern-
ity, where every death is equally dispensable and indispensable, mean-
ingful and meaningless, and is indeed symptomatic of the obsession with
“remains” in the wake of a devastated human century. As David L. Eng
and David Kazanjian claim, “mourning what remains of lost histories as
well as histories of loss” has been a predominant concern for our times.
They argue that “the pervasive losses of the twentieth century are laden
with creative, political potential . . . If loss is known only by what remains
of it, then the politics and ethics of mourning lie in the interpretation of
what remains—how remains are produced and animated, how they are sus-
tained and read.” The specter of spectacular death that haunts our histori-
cal moment is rendered suspect in Lahiri’s work; instead, in her death-ly
preoccupation with the realm of the intimate and the domestic, she offers
an unspeakably private contradistinction to public forms and forums of
clamorous mourning. Her fictional death scenes deliver a deeply affective
commentary on and engaged critique of current ways of speaking about
and in the name of death. Pointedly and poignantly, death as an apparatus of
loss arrives without its usual traceable containers, the corpse and its corpus,
suggesting the utter anguish of the death scene attended in absentia in an
age inundated with images of body bags, memorial ceremonies, and com-
memorative performances, both in speech acts and in monuments. Lahiri
takes the occasion of numerous death scenes to mark (in both senses: to
inscribe and to memorialize) the presence of immigrant life in the United
States. Death, its scene and its scope, its sting and its seasoning, becomes
the locus at which immigrant life enacts its poignancy and ephemerality.
The death scene, for Lahiri’s migrants, is the limit case of existential endur-
ance and the end of memory in a land where immigrants have been able
to realize their dreams as Americans and their dreams as Indians but are
unable to manage their nostalgia: the ache and longing (algos) to return
home (nóstos). In Lahiri’s fiction, death in the adopted land becomes a site
for fixing and rooting the migrant into his or her adopted country, a claim
final and irrefutable; thereby turning the question, “Where are you from?”
into “Where will you die?”
Lahiri’s death scenes perform the function of witnessing the otherwise uncataloged lives of the specific migrant community she writes about, the Hindu Bengalis from the Indian subcontinent. She is interested in elaborating what happens to a people when it cannot produce earthly proof of its presence on the landscape of American life, namely, in the shape of markers like graves and reliquary legacies to commemorate names. Because of the Hindu practices of cremation and scattering of ashes, there are no “remains” of the Bengali diaspora, except in ineffable mourning rituals intelligible only to the initiated. Thus the community has to be constantly instantiated and incantated with others who authenticate the existence of the group, and yet that very group has to be worked against to forge an “earthly” relationship with the new country of residence and rooting. Included in this struggle is the stake in “Bengaliness,” a particular form of linguistic-cultural identity that is swamped by the sweep of both “Indianess” and “Americanness.” Even as it emerges from the rich soil of twentieth-century diasporic writing to which white settler nations have been so conducive, Lahiri’s fiction undertakes something far more ambitious and acute than the mere schizophrenic performance of the migrant caught between competing claims of the national. It tests the existing parameters by which “writing the migrant” may be comprehended via the rhetoric of postcolonial malady and nationalist interpellation. Lahiri eschews uneasy techniques of managerial multiculturalism and instead uses the old literary trope of cultivation to analyze the centrality of earth in the consciousness and sense of belonging of her “foreigners” to the New World.

Published nine years after Interpreter of Maladies (Lahiri’s debut short story collection that won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 2000), “Going Ashore” forms the perfect bookend to “A Temporary Matter,” the first story in Interpreter of Maladies. In “A Temporary Matter,” Shoba and Shukumar enact the death of their relationship after the stillborn arrival of their first child six months earlier. In an elaborate and innovative ritual of confession, during five evenings of candlelit darkness when the electricity in their Boston neighborhood is cut off for repair work, they tell each other of the transgressions, small and big, that they have committed against each other. There is the renewal of possibility—not of their relationship, but of understanding, of what went on during the life of the relationship, and what now remains of it in its scene of death. Starting with that story and continuing through all her subsequent work, Lahiri makes death the locum for an unseen and unheard Bengali diaspora amid the grand silence (r) that is American suburbia and small-town life. The thematics of death are
unfolded ingeniously in the story of Gogol Ganguli in Lahiri’s 2003 novel *The Namesake*, in which his “American” given name becomes a surrogate for a patronymic and a genealogy that cannot enact its meaning in a land where subcontinental names are not self-explanatory and have to be constantly spelled out, accounted for, and footnoted. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the death scene, in its absent invocations, comes to reside permanently in the psychic life of a diaspora that is slowly losing its foundational claim to migrancy and that can stake its allegiance to the adopted land only in the foreignness and otherness of death.

**Of Names and Deaths**

I start with *The Namesake*, where names and scenes of death are synecdochically intertwined. As Jacques Derrida writes:

> At the very least, to be dead means that no profit or deficit, no good or evil, whether calculated or not, can ever return again to the bearer of the name. Only the name can inherit, and this is why the name, to be distinguished from the bearer, is always and a priori a dead man’s name, a name of death. What returns to the name never returns to the living. . . . And if life returns, it will return to the name but not to the living, in the name of the living as a name of the dead."

The novel spans forty years in the lives of the Gangulis, of whom there are “six pages full . . . three columns to a page, in the Calcutta telephone directory” (*Namesake*, 67). But in the New England suburb where our protagonists live their (not-at-)all-American lives, measured out in infrequent trips to Calcutta, “they feel as if they are the only Gangulis in the world” (64). Ashima and Ashoke’s firstborn, Gogol, a son, the carrier of the surname, has wanted to rip out those directory pages in Calcutta “as a souvenir,” a counter to the fact that *Ganguli* “is never an option on key chains or metal pins or refrigerator magnets” in America (67, 66). He helps his father paste “individual golden letters bought from a rack in the hardware store, spelling out GANGULI on one side of the mailbox,” only for it to be vandalized to GANG GREEN one Halloween (67). The “peculiarity of his name” becomes apparent on a field trip in sixth grade when Gogol is eleven (68). The certainty that he is but an uncertain resident in this landscape, no matter that he was born here and will most probably die here, comes when he and his classmates are taken to a graveyard and asked to make gravestone rubbings. Even as the other kids excitedly claim names that might appear
in their own families, Gogol knows “that there is no Ganguli here. He is old enough to know that he himself will be burned, not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life” (69). He can lay claim only to ancient, obsolete names like “ABIJAH CRAVEN 1701-45; ANGUISH MATHER, A CHILD, PEREGRINE WOTTON D. 1699”; it is his first astonishing realization and a discomfitting foreshadowing that, like itinerant fashion, “names die over time, that they perish just as people do” (70).

Derrida, in his discussion of the legacy of Nietzsche, proffers that to “put one’s name on the line (with everything a name involves and which cannot be summed up in a self), to stage signatures, to make an immense bio-graphical paraph” is to “make us forget the fact of [one’s] death.” Such immemoriality is denied to Lahiri’s characters, all of whom carry names gravid with meaning and portentous with inimitability in the time-honored tradition of the Bengalis. Lahiri informs her unaccustomed readers of the practice that “Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person,” a dakhnam, or pet name, “by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other unguarded moments,” and a bhalonam, “for identification in the outside world” (Namesake, 26). With poetic and philosophic flourish, Lahiri elaborates on this ritual to which every Hindu Bengali has a claim and that makes complete semiotic as well as symbolic sense to the indoctrinated:

Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated. They are a reminder, too, that one is not all things to all people. . . . Good names tend to represent dignified and enlightened qualities. Ashima means “she who is limitless, without borders.” Ashoke, the name of an emperor, means “he who transcends grief.” Pet names have no such aspirations. Pet names are never recorded officially, only uttered and remembered. (26)

But Gogol is not allowed such easy access to the public-private distinction. Not only does he have “a pet name turned good name, but a last name turned first name,” but he realizes with growing dismay that “no one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name. Not even the source of his namesake” (78). In high school, thanks to an inspired English teacher, the first “to know and to care about Gogol the author,” our protagonist learns about Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol’s “eccentric genius” as well as “lifelong unhappiness” and “mental instability” (88, 91, 100). Tired of telling people that Gogol doesn’t mean anything in “Indian,”
he cannot understand why out of the panoply of romantic and dashing Russian literary names like Alexander or Anton or Leo, his parents had to choose the "weirdest namesake" (76). What Gogol does not know yet is that such name giving is not a peculiarity of his parents but a common tradition among Bengalis and Keralites in India, not only because of their Russian sympathies but because of an expansive sense of the world. Lahiri belabors the points here about the impossibility of the possibility of inheriting "proper" names in our times, when psychobiographies and indexes of the self are discontinuous and fragmented, and about the incommensurabilities of histories that make some names pronounceable and memorable, and others not.

Such an enactment of unshareable histories is effected when Gogol is told in his early twenties that he is named after Nikolai Vasilievich not just because his father is an admirer of the author's works but because the Russian master is also his father's second life-giver. At twenty-two, Ashoke almost loses his life in a train crash in India. The only reason he can be rescued from among the wreckage and dead bodies all around is the fortuitous sight of his fingers flickering by the pages of "a hardbound collection of short stories" by Gogol that he had been reading (Namesake, 13). The following year, as he recovers from a body broken in five different places, Ashoke recollects the life-altering conversation he had with a now-dead fellow passenger on the train. Mr. Ghosh had advised the bookish young man to do himself a favor, to "pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world" as he can (16). Confined to a bed so that his bones can heal, Ashoke plans a life in the larger world, despite his grandfather's belief that books are the most suitable vehicles for traveling, and he is born "a third time, in America" (21). Having had "three lives by thirty" (21), Ashoke is thankful to his parents and his ancestors but not to god when his own son is born; instead, he thanks that Russian author of Dead Souls, who spent his entire life feeling like a foreigner in his own skin and with whom Ashoke feels an affinity and a sympathy. When Ashima's grandmother's letter, which carries the name that is to be bestowed on her sahib great-grandson, is lost in transit (a deft metaphor for migrancy) and there is the comic danger that the newborn will be named Baby Boy Ganguli, that long-dead soul of Gogol's comes to the rescue again. And thus Gogol Ganguli leaves the hospital with a proper U.S. birth certificate, with the strange(r) nomenclature that presages his alienation and inherent aloneness and a life spent as a "divided soul" (the title of Nikolai Gogol's biography); ironically, in this sense, his name is indeed prophetically and self-fulfillingly Bengali (90).
It is when Ashoke finally tells his son the story behind his naming that Gogol realizes how his pet name means "something completely new, bound up with a catastrophe he has unwittingly embodied for years" (124). In this chronicle of naming, Lahiri turns upside down the American myth of reinvention of the self, a rite of passage that involves in the same instance the consolidation of a singular identity with the death of all previous multiple selves. In an America where "anything is possible" and where a "president is called Jimmy" (100, 77), Gogol Ganguli at eighteen changes his name to Nikhil. At the moment of his second baptism, Gogol experiences sadness, conjuring up all those moments in U.S. history when migrants, slaves, indentured laborers, and others in the history of colonialism and settlement were (compelled) to change their names in the land of opportunity. Of course, the only complication is that "he doesn't feel like Nikhil... he feels as if he's cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different" (105). This is a confusion that he enacts in his relationships with the all-American women he gets involved with, conscious that his immersion into their lives is "a betrayal of his own" (141). The impermanence of his surreptitious, though legal, identity is brought home to him when he encounters the "small private graveyard" where his girlfriend Maxine "will be buried one day" (153). He knows immediately that the land "is an essential part of her... a place that will always be here for her," where she will "bury her parents" and bring her children to visit (156). Antiquity and futurity lie in the preserve of those who have such a place to come to, however "disconnected from the world" or "far from things" it may be (154, 155). Indeed if the very validity and valency of immigrant life depends on the inhabitation of land in death, then Gogol will never have the right to live his own life; he will forever be the purveyor of a borrowed patch of earth, sky, water, and air, like his secondhand name. This cold hard fact of (migrant) life is one he has to face painfully, unexpectedly, when the giver of his own name dies. The scene in which this death takes place epitomizes the logic of the novel.

Ashoke's death from a sudden heart attack, away from the suburban home he has made with Ashima, brings Gogol face-to-face with the first significant loss of his life, though his parents have been all too acquainted with such loss over the years, in their exile. The news of those deaths has always been conveyed over the static and echoes of long-distance transatlantic phone calls or in letters arriving long after the fact. The immediacy or belatedness of bad news that unerringly finds its destination does nothing to alleviate its pain for Ashoke and Ashima; absent from the scenes of
the deaths of their past lives, they are forced to face the absence of their origins in their present abode. Each trip back home, Ashoke and Ashima are “at once apprehensive and eager, steeling themselves to find fewer faces at the airport in Calcutta, to confront the deaths of relatives since the last time they were there” (141). For the first time, Gogol knows something of their guilt and utter helplessness in the face of the incapacity to be present at the death scenes of their beloved kin, “of arriving weeks, sometimes months later, when there was nothing left to do” (179). Being called on to identify his father’s body in the anonymous morgue of a hospital, all Gogol can glimpse of the death scene are “the curtains that had partly girded his father when life left him” (173). There is no sign of his father in either the rental car or the rented apartment that Gogol has to clear out before returning to his family home, even as his mother instructs him not to “bring anything back” because “It’s not our way” (175). Death denies, proscribes, and makes a taboo of memento keeping; instead every organic sign of the life lived has to be gently wiped away. The sparseness and austerity of his father’s last months of life are echoed in the mourning rites that give meaning to his life in the eleven days that follow, in the blandness of his family’s mourning diet, in their abstinence from the usual social flows in the months to follow. There is no tombstone to cling to afterward, and it is not until the first anniversary of his father’s death that Gogol realizes that the “closest thing his father has to a grave” or memorial is the single framed portrait that hangs in the hallway of his childhood home (189).16

When Ashima decides to return to India, she realizes that after thirty-three years of missing her life in India, she will now miss this house, this town, and this country in which “she had grown to know and love her husband” (Namesake, 279). Having sold and picked “the bones of the house clean,” leaving only the framed photograph, that portable tombstone, to be taken down and packed at the end, she must leave it to Gogol to acknowledge the profound bereavement that accompanies the thought that this family home will be occupied by strangers; “there will be no trace that they were ever here, no house to enter, no name in the telephone directory” (277, 281). The house will not give up to its new inhabitants any of its secrets; there will be absolutely nothing “to signify the years his family has lived here, no evidence of the effort, the achievement it had been” (281). Unlike the Abijah Cravens, the Anguish Mathers, the Ratliffs who “own the moon that floats over the lake, and the sun and the clouds,” the Gangulis will have left nothing behind (154). They will have each arrived with a single suitcase and will depart with not much more. It will be left to their children
to leave what mark they can on this land, apropos of Lahiri’s authorial wish fulfillment in her choice of the epigraph in her next work, _Unaccustomed Earth._

**Of Tombs and Homes**

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth.

—Epigraph of _Unaccustomed Earth_, from Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Custom House"

If _The Namesake_ had adumbrated the impossibility of witnessing the migrant death scene because of migrants’ forever “dwelling unconnected, in a perpetual state of expectation, of longing” for the old country (Namesake, 281), then _Unaccustomed Earth_ chronicles the next generation, children who, in spite of their acculturation, still carry the badge and baggage of foreignness, of being unhomed in uncomprehending environs, of being unable to be present at death scenes, of learning to mourn its unaccustomed grief in oblivion. Claiming kinship with the Pilgrim fathers, with those Puritan settlers of this westward-bound frontier land, through the figure of Hawthorne’s descendants, Lahiri gestures toward a similar space for her newer migrants, who will come to share in the ennui and melancholy that so characterizes contemporary America. The putative descendants of the Gangulis have let go of their prophetic names and have settled for innocuous ones, even as they assimilate, chameleonlike, the geography and sociology of their parents’ adopted nation. Their aspirational pursuits are reminiscent of those of the older migrant generation, their lifestyles similar to those of many other hybrid young people their own age, but their share of pain and loss in this New World is still peculiar to their kind, the losses they experience a specific kindred trace of Bengali identity. Lahiri’s 2008 work rehearses the inevitable attraction of affinity to identity and, at the same time, relinquishes its overarching appeal as a way of making meaning of family in the New World.

Before I go on to the death scenes in the triptych that constitutes Hema and Kaushik’s love story, I want to briefly trace the trajectory for the opening story that sets the tone for this volume of death and its scene. It sketches the absence of which Lahiri speaks unceasingly, mirroring “A Temporary Matter” from her first collection, _The Interpreter of Maladies_. In
"A Temporary Matter," Shukumar cannot forgive himself for being away from the death scene of his stillborn child while he is at "an academic conference." That unforgivable failure to be present at the site of death is the recurring motif and red thread drawn through the five stand-alone stories in Unaccustomed Earth too, before it brings us to the final three, where the scene of death looms large over two lovers. The title story of Unaccustomed Earth is imbued with the triumph and the tragedy of Bengali families trying to retain their tenuous bond over "the staggering breadth" of the American soil (Unaccustomed, 7). The pregnant Ruma and her father are brought together in an unfamiliar order, in a reversal of the parent-child relationship, as they both try to cope with the recent loss of her mother. Her father, who had "never experienced death up close" because "when his parents and relatives had died, he was always continents away," has had to confront it suddenly when his wife dies during a routine gallstone surgery (30). Tellingly, he is spared "witnessing the ugly violence of it," having been absent from the scene of death "technically, when his wife passed away" on the operating table (30). Emotionally unavailable for his wife all his life, forcing his daughter to take on the role of a surrogate spouse, he leaves behind a small garden that he plants with his grandson, including a hydrangea "in honour of his wife" (49). Oblivious "to her mother's needs in other ways" but becoming an "expert over the years at cultivating the things her mother liked to cook with," Ruma's father makes provisions for the well-being of his bereft daughter in the only way he can: toiling in "unfriendly soil" (16). Thus the thematics of rooting and routing, acculturation and settlement, nativeness/foreignness and hybridity, distance and parting, betrayal and its discovery, love lost and let go of, and ultimately death in absentia and coping with the remains of loss are presented as well as anticipated in this opening story. Death becomes a loss that is inseparable from other losses of diasporic life (of name, nation, home, language and of the other), and it also stands in for a loss almost greater than the sum of its death-ly parts. Death has a substitutive, even surrogate, presence as the losses it gestures toward can be addressed only indirectly and mediated only through the site of death.

By the time we come to the triptych that constitutes Hema and Kaushik's love story, we have almost come to expect that red thread of surrogacy. The first time we meet the lovers in "Once in a Lifetime," in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Hema is six and Kaushik nine: his is the surrogate family to which her own attached itself when she was still in her mother's womb. The farewell party Hema's parents throw for Kaushik's family when
they decide to return to India marks her first conscious recollection of Kaushik's presence in her life; for years after, she is forced to wear his heavy winter clothing. Hema's attempt to get rid of this hand-me-down weight of Bengali connection leaves her completely unprepared for the reunion with sixteen-year-old Kaushik when his parents return to Boston from Bombay. At thirteen, she is vulnerable to his sullen charm, never having felt such "schoolgirl attraction" for "someone belonging to the world" of her parents (Unaccustomed, 234). Repeating the motif of kindred (mis-)connection between Gogol and his wife, Moushumi, Lahiri suggests that human affiliation strikes its roots deep in the soil of familiarity. Hema thinks about Kaushik: "Without my having to do a thing, you would come to know me and like me" (234). But Kaushik is oblivious to such fantasies; he carries a secret that escapes from him when he shares a find with Hema: some tombstones that he has discovered in the woods behind her house, "a row of them" belonging to "people named Simonds, a family of six" (249). As Hema begins "unburying the buried," she discovers the last family member, Emma, "died in 1923." Hema is disturbed "by the similarity of the name" to her own, wondering if Kaushik too has noticed the homonymy (249). This is when Kaushik reveals to her that the reason they have returned to the United States is that his mother is dying from cancer; he wishes they were not Hindus, so his mother could be buried somewhere. At this fragile moment, the "forced intimacy" of semisibling connection they have shared for weeks utterly fails to be of any use or comfort to either; "burdened and betrayed" by this terrible knowledge, feeling contaminated by his contagion of loss, Hema starts "hating [Kaushik] all over again" (251).

"Year's End" carries forward the inadequacy of kinship to contend with loss; when Kaushik and his father visit Calcutta after his mother's death, his grandmother expects her forty-two-year-old daughter to walk into the house any moment, "in spite of the fact that a photograph of [his] mother, larger than life and draped with a tuberose garland, hung on [the] living-room wall" (Unaccustomed, 253). Photographs, those all-too-substantive and -substitutive afterimages of real life, symbolize their very failure to capture or concretize it in any way (Roland Barthes was right). Signs of animation are "reduced to a handful of stock scenes" and photographs of his mother "banished" to a shoebox in the "void that followed" her prolonged tryst with death (273, 286, 265). In this second story of the triptych, Kaushik has to confront his father's putting aside "the solid weight of those days" by remarrying a much younger Bengali woman, an adult moving-on that initiates a rite of passage for Kaushik himself. Photographs
punctuate each and every fault line of this rearrangement of family desires and kinship structures when Kaushik comes home from college for the Christmas break to a new unit with two stepsisters, the closest thing he would ever have to siblings. He tells us:

I felt separate from them in every way but at the same time could not deny the things that bound us together. There was my father of course, but he seemed to be the least relevant in a way. Like them, I'd made that journey from India to Massachusetts, too old not to experience the shock of it, too young to have a say in the matter. . . . Like them I had lost a parent and was now being asked to accept a replacement. (272)

Again, it is the transatlantic journey that seems to define the binding nature of their relationship; he shares his Bengali meal with them and takes them out to Dunkin' Donuts, combining their now-common American and Indian legacies, fulfilling the role of an older brother, sensing that they needed him "to guard them" just as he needed them, "from the growing, incontrovertible fact" that their mother and his father "now formed a couple" (283). Ultimately, this bond forged over their respective losses is too shallow to sustain any deepening, and Kaushik leaves his father's abode to undertake a journey of mourning for his mother, an expedition paralleling Hindu pilgrimages bereaved sons undertake in the Indian subcontinent.

As he grieves and drives northward, Kaushik travels over land that is nothing like any place he has ever seen, waves of the Atlantic Ocean "violent enough to break" him, growing "more desolate," and for that very reason, claiming him (289, 290). Despite having been an avid amateur photographer, Kaushik had refused to photograph his father's new family. Now he refuses to document any of these surrogate days when he occupies the intimate spaces of strangers, as he traverses "strange small places that felt more like people's living rooms," has nothing to say to fishers "who had lived in those villages all their lives," and where "no one had the ability to reach" him (290). In his darkroom, his mother had once speculated that death "must be something like this," and now when he travels in the dark of year's end, he feels that "it was like being dead, [his] escape allowing [him], to taste that tremendous power [his] mother possessed forever" (278, 290). Finally, close to the Canadian border, Kaushik prepares a grave for his mother. She had wanted her ashes to be scattered over the Atlantic; instead, he digs the cold-hardened ground with "a stick and a sharpened rock" and buries the shoebox of photographs along the "cliffs overlooking the Bay of Fundy" (291). Maybe some day, decades and centuries down the line,
some descendant of other migrants will discover these images and wonder about those who came before. In this unmarked tomb will lie buried the secrets of a Bengali life, even as these photographs will be a silent witness to narratives Lahiri spins, making her own claim to immortality. Lahiri’s masterstroke is that leaving the tomb without names or dedications, burying only flimsy photographic imagery, allows the beautiful inconstancy and unreliability of evidentiarity to enter the field of memorialization itself. She thereby makes explicit the prismatic work of what Marianne Hirsch calls “family frames” that “tell a variety of stories, from a variety of often competing perspectives” of the “postmodern space of cultural memory composed of leftovers, debris, single items that are left to be collected and assembled in many ways.”

In a closely argued analysis of *Interpreter of Maladies*, Gita Rajan maintains that Lahiri uses the “reverse maneuver of an imagined community” of readers who “slip in and out” of uneven, fragmentary conceptions of South Asian “liminality” so as to assess the ethical responses of characters caught between “a brand of American pragmatism” and the “intersubjective space between strangers in chance encounters where the memory of the epistemic origin (i.e., of India or as Indian) instigates a complex connectivity.” This complex connectivity is what propels the characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* to contest and combat their legacy, prompts them to either take up with or shy away from Bengali partners, lovers, spouses: each one of those responses is a reactive engagement with the idea of an identity handed and honed down until it inhabits the very skin and sinews of their selves. The romance between thirty-seven-year-old Hema and forty-year-old Kaushik in “Going Ashore” is enacted in the shadow and préfiguration of this susceptible and suspect connectivity, this all-too-difficult and impossible kinship that both allies and alienates. Like other Lahiri characters, Hema has spent all her adult life working to be “free of her past and free of her future.” She has tried by cultivating a career in classical studies, in a language that is not only alien, but dead: Latin; by investing “in a place where so many different times stood cheek by jowl like guests at a crowded party”: Rome; and by having a relationship with a married American man who promises for “nearly a decade” to leave his wife (*Unaccustomed*, 298). Attentive readers will remember that here, too, she is touched by the legacy of Kaushik’s link with Rome, where his parents had a layover on their way from Bombay to Boston. The knowledge of Kaushik’s dead mother, who had given Hema her first three bras and had told her that she would grow up to be beautiful, lies between Hema and Kaushik when they inevitably meet each
other, finally, as lovers in that charmed city where neither of them speaks their mother tongue. She is the only lover of Kaushik’s who has known his mother, “her face one he’d known,” and there is no need for him to address her in “the polite form” (310). They both know the precious and precarious nature of what they have “stumbled upon. . . . [It] demanded every particle of their care” (311).

In Kaushik, who now makes his living as an international photojournalist, who tries to erase and escape from his bitter private history by capturing and broadcasting horrific public and political histories, Hema finds someone who is kin and akin at the same time, apposite and an opposite. Bringing “a dead world to life” through her study of the Etruscans, “that mysterious civilization prior to Rome, people who had possibly wandered from Asia Minor to central Italy and flourished for four centuries, who had ruled Rome for one hundred years before turning obsolete,” Hema is the equal and charged force that magnetizes Kaushik, who moves from one refugee camp, one disaster site, to another “with his camera . . . stealing from it, hoarding it, unwilling to let it go” (299, 300, 309). In their New World contestation with the past as another country, the present as dream-invention, and the future as always-deferred freedom, Hema and Kaushik find in the Etruscans a perfect emblem for their reunion, “their belief in signs and portents, their obsession with the journey out of life,” an augury for their own all-too-brief love (314). It is destined that their last days together are spent in a town founded by the Etruscans, where in the Guar­nacci Museum they see “lined on shelves, hundreds of urns in which the ancient people of Volterra had stored the ashes of their dead” (319). In the detailed descriptions on these urns, Hema and Kaushik find their perfect ancestors, their pedigree from ancient travelers: “They were called urns but were more like little caskets, made of alabaster or terra-cotta, the lids topped with figures with large heads and disproportionately small bodies, grotesquely but indisputably alive. . . . The sides were covered with carvings showing so many migrations across land and departures in covered wagons to the underworld, so many fantastic beasts and fish-tailed gods of the sea” (319–20).

Parting from him at the Fiumicino airport, Hema forgets at the security gates a thin gold bangle inherited from her grandmother, “the one she never removed,” an ornament Kaushik recognizes from when he was ten (323). However “possessively” he might have linked his fingers through it, “drawing her to him,” Kaushik does not, in Hema’s mind, figure in the “only road available” to her future (Unaccustomed, 312, 323, 324). The only
trace of their love, of them, is the bangle left behind among the countless “lost” items of airports’ transit spaces, Hema’s surrogate trace that feels as if she had “left a piece of her body behind” (324).

Reminiscent of Gogol’s fascination with graves, earthly markers of death, Kaushik, too, is tinged with the certainty that he will leave no such trace; he knows he has “reached an end here” (321). Indeed, Kaushik’s grave is a watery mass that mingles with all other such graves of bodies drowned in the 2004 tsunami, nameless bodies that wash up as flotsam and jetsam in unknown territory in the wake of a natural force of destruction. Only the photographs he has taken and uploaded onto his Web site remain for those interested in his career as a photojournalist: virtual markers as insubstantial as the obituary that appears in the New York Times. From Gogol to Kaushik is an entire line of names, that first and that last introduction of a human being, forever to remain without meaning and oblivious to the non-Bengali land in which they live out their existence and on which they leave behind no trace. It is in the chronicles of death-that-obliterates-its-remains that Lahiri counters the erasing power of death insofar as (perhaps paradoxically, perhaps surprisingly, perhaps literally) the text becomes “what remains”: a mark that erasure has not been completed. Literature, of course, promises the impossibility of erasure where the affective and political demand of record keeping and inscription may be offered in a direction other than the incipient melancholia of memorials and monuments. Lahiri’s exhortation to bear witness to the silences and absences of a model minority, to not let go unobserved the death scenes and mourning rituals of unspectacular “ordinary” deaths, goes beyond the difficult demands of contemporary memory (in all its inventiveness) and the weight of collective history it carries. Her argument may be in the direction of freedom from memory, a desire that most of her migrants certainly express in their movement away from origins, but in the successive call and pull of names that embody their being, we may not be there yet.

Notes


2 Arranged marriage is the term used commonly for Indian matrimonial alliances negotiated between willing families, taking into consideration astrological, caste, class, educational, linguistic, religious, and monetary factors. Increasingly, in an age of rural-to-urban and global migration, older patterns of establishing lineage are giving way to contemporarily relevant considerations of the potential partners, who often meet each other beforehand to tally more personal and life-choice compatibilities.
3 Noelle-Brada Williams, in “Reading Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies as a Short Story Cycle” (MELUS 29.3/4 [2004]: 451-64), suggests that Lahiri’s narratives work as story cycles with characters and plots often repeated. I interpret this as a gesture of repetition that emphasizes the commonality as well as commensurability of migrant narratives.

4 Tahira Naqvi, Dying in a Strange Country (Toronto: TSAR Publications, 2001). Naqvi is a South African writer of Indian subcontinental origin. Her stories home in on one of the most terrifying apprehensions of first-generation migrants: that of not dying in or not being able to have their remains interred in their original homelands, either of which would fulfill the fantasy of the diasporic return, at least in (the finality of) death.


6 Ibid., ix.

7 I am indebted to Katrina Schlunke for this beautiful suggestion and for unraveling many other threads in my musings.


11 Ibid., 7.

12 Even though writing is seen as a kind of death, literature itself is a claim to futurity, and in this Lahiri may be seen to have guaranteed a representative memorialization of her name and that of the Bengalis she writes about.

13 Family pet names (daknam) like Goethe, Rousseau, and Pele are grist to the Bengali nomenclatural mill. As tribute to great philosophers and sports legends, these daknam are sometimes hailed more often than the proper Indian names bestowed on the individuals.

14 The term psychobiographies is from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (“The Political Economy of Women as Seen by a Literary Critic,” in Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics, ed. Elizabeth Weed [New York: Routledge, 1989], 227), and the phrase itineraries of the self is from Antonio Gramsci (“The Study of Philosophy,” in Selections from The Prison Notebooks, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell [New York: International Publishers, 1971], 324). Both works refer to narrativizations and constructions of identity in this age of identity. Lahiri rehearses the painful routine of spelling out “unfamiliar” names for tele-operators in anglophone nations as a recurring motif. Later, when Gogol’s wife, Moushumi, has an affair, she (re-)turns to a man who has insisted on calling her Mouse: her betrayal is not only an ethical problematic in interpersonal relationships (not because she is cheating on her husband, but why she is doing it), but indicative of the epistemic violence done in the name of rationalization, standardization, and ease of nomenclature, thereby doing damage to the context and histories from which such “unpronounceable” names spring.

15 Lahiri reminds us that the very insistence on surnames is an imperial imposition for
Bengalis (and other colonized peoples): “Ganguli is a legacy of the British, an anglicized way of pronouncing his real surname, Gangopadhyay” (Namesake, 67).

In a marked departure from the novel, Mira Nair captures the poignancy of the death scene in her 2006 film adaptation. The last time we see Ashoke is in the phone booth at the hospital, speaking to Ashima, telling her about feeling unwell. She had bid farewell to him at the airport on his way to Cleveland, a scene in which the unspoken and utterly unpretentious; but abiding, love between the partners is performed by two excellent actors. Gogol identifies his father’s body in the uncompromising blue and grey shades of the morgue and cleans up his father’s last dwelling in the equally harsh minimalism of a generic furnished apartment. But the scene that follows this is stark and shocking in its observance of a mourning rite that Gogol is not required to observe in diaspora, but that he chooses to: he gets his head shaved at a barber’s shop while rap music blares on, oblivious and inattentive to the migrant spirit departed. In the novel, Lahiri does not belabor this disjunction between business-as-usual in America and the personal, intimate losses of its inhabitants. Instead she reminds us that Gogol had witnessed just such a scene as a child in the 1970s when his grandfather died, when his father had shaved off all his own hair with a disposable razor in their bathroom. After Ashima walked in screaming, Ashoke “had shut the door, and locked it, and emerged shrunken and bald” (Namesake, 179).

17 Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies, 2.
20 Hindu women are supposed to leave one gold ornament on their corpses for Yama, the lord of death, to collect as his fee when the soul is delivered from its earthly form at the entrance to the otherworld. When Hema “forgets” her bangle at the security gates in Rome, it is as if she leaves behind her Bengali grandmother’s legacy as she moves forward into marital life with a non-Bengali man. Hema’s bangle then symbolically provides the tithe to Kaushik’s watery grave, from the one place in the world where they had been utterly bound together in their kinship as Bengalis.