

Excerpt from “Sheep Hair”

On nights my mother drove us the hour to Naz 8 Cinema, she ballooned her pockets with popcorn, and, for three hours, we sat, blued by Bollywood. Other nights, she was lent bootlegs. Flicks about Raj or Rahul. Grainy. Lagging. Rahul’s laughter, ensuing like a footnote.

On long drives, my mother listened to the cassette of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, and we began foraging the songs for familiar words. Our first language was entirely secondhanded, borrowed from my mother’s mouth; a vocabulary of tendering, not tenderness. It was during Intermissions at Naz 8 Cinema that we first rehearsed words like mohabbat and qurbaan. Half the movies were about a woman saying no until she was hassled into saying yes, inventing a new genre of chasing. *That’s just her style. She’s saying no but in her heart, she says yes*, we sang, dubbing the dialogue with the English subtitles the way we sometimes dubbed our prayers with One Missisipi, Two Mississippi, Three Missisipi.

Our films, in Hindi. Our prayers, in Arabic. Our mother, in Urdu. It wasn’t the language we replied with, but the one we trusted in.