Living in the west, I have grown accustomed to thinking of summer as berry season. The indolent pleasure of repeatedly dipping into bowls of sun-warmed blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, or gooseberries and absorbing their sweet juiciness affirms, as nothing else, that the North American winter has been left behind. Once upon a time, though, I had another life where it was winter that ushered in a season of small, delicate, flavorful fruits, which could be consumed as endlessly as the berries of summer. In tropical Bengal, January came with a delicious promise that mutated and extended into the next eight months.

The first of these small fruits, *topa-kul* and *narkel-kul*, came with a bind. Bengali Hindus are forbidden to eat them until Saraswati Puja, when the goddess of learning and music, Saraswati, is worshipped with great fanfare. The date varies from year to year, determined according to the Bengali calendar and the phases of the moon. In the years when the fifth day of the waxing winter moon in the month of Magh happened to fall in February instead of January, children and adults in my orthodox Hindu family were sorely tested. The memory of the previous year’s pleasures filled us with the itch to bite into these sweet-and-sour fruits displayed in Calcutta’s markets and sidewalk stalls. Available yet untouchable, they were a daily invitation to transgression.

The sight of skeptics, unbelievers, and non-Bengalis insouciantly purchasing the fruits—worse, popping a few into their mouth as they walked off—became the proverbial snake in the garden, underscoring both the temptation and the pain of deprivation for me and my cousins. Why couldn’t we do the same, we wondered; why did we have to obey these silly rules? But a greater fear held us in thrall. If we lost Saraswati’s favor by eating *kul* ahead of her arrival, we would be doomed to a lifetime of ignorance and illiteracy. Silly or not, it was a belief that had been thoroughly inculcated in us.

Most years, though, the pleasure was timely, honed to perfection by a short period of desiring what we could not have. The goddess sailed in serenely at the peak of *kul* season, borne by her carrier, the white swan. Dressed in white and gold, she held a book in one hand and the sitar-like *veena* in the other. While the priests or family elders worshipped the image with all the appropriate rituals, we children—made to fast till the *puja* was over—focused avidly on the large plates of fruits and sweets set out before the goddess. Soon enough, though, it was time for mortals to taste these offerings Saraswati had supposedly graced with her acceptance.

We always ate the pale green oval *narkel-kul* first. Its firm white flesh and sweet-sour taste toyed delicately with the tongue, leading us down the path of overindulgence. Its cousin, the *topa-kul*, was more of a challenge to the palate. Smaller and rounder, its red-skinned form contained flesh that was usually too tart for comfort. It was, therefore, just the right fruit to be made into pickles and chutneys in combination with spices and oil, or date palm sugar. But the simplest way to make *topa-kul* into a treat that made the tongue shiver with pleasure was to pop them open (one...
squeeze was enough), toss them liberally with salt, and leave them on balcony, windowsill, or roof for a few days to dry in the sun. The treatment transformed the slipperiness of the inner pulp into an elastic consistency without impairing the fragrance, while the parched skin yielded its layered flavor and texture only after prolonged chewing. During holidays or weekends, my cousins and I could think of few better ways to spend a lazy winter afternoon than by sitting on the balcony or roof, our backs toasted by the balmy tropical sun, making our way through a pile of salted topa-kul.

The warming southwestern breezes that usher in to Bengal blow away the two kinds of kul to make room for a couple of fruits that are exquisitely delicate in both taste and appearance. Unlike most berries, the jamrul is neither round nor oval. Instead, it is shaped like a small bell, narrow at the stem and flaring out into a wide mouth where the flesh is folded into four petal-like formations. It is almost more of a pleasure to hold and observe a jamrul than to eat it. The color is white, washed with an undertone of pale green, and the flesh carries the translucency of expensive jade. The taste matches the coolness of the look. Biting into a jamrul is like having a mouthful of warm granita, if you can imagine that. As you eat, the flesh breaks up into crunchy yet moist crystals, releasing a juice that is almost like water. But then the elusive flavor—like the night-blooming flowers of hasnahana (an ornamental vine), like the essence of green tea—emerges, tantalizes for a brief moment, then disappears. It makes the jamrul an ideal fruit of intermission, helping Bengalis segue from the delicious coolness of winter into the scorching heat of summer.

But it was the golapijam (no relative of the gulab jamun served in Indian restaurants abroad) that became my favorite fruit at this time of year as I grew out of childhood into my teens. The reason could be its comparative rarity and very brief availability. But I think it was something else. The golapijam tempted me to sin willfully, thus beginning my transition to adulthood. For observant Hindus in Bengal, the calendar is dotted with numerous occasions that require one to fast, with or without drinking water. When daughters reach puberty, mothers and grandmothers start inducing them into the intricate rituals of the believer’s life. Fasting becomes mandatory on many occasions, no matter how difficult it might be for a young person. Like teenagers everywhere, I too precipitated many battles because of my propensity to question instructions, to flout the norms of “good” behavior. Instead of relenting, however, my elders only pressed me harder to conform.

Once, when I was told that I would have to fast all day in honor of some obscure deity or saint, I felt particularly put upon. It was, I remember, a holiday. There was no school, so no immediate prospect of escaping from home. Furious, and seething with contempt for adults who were always preaching the value of a scientific education and yet enforcing superstitious practices, I flounced upstairs and banished myself to the roof. From its fourth-floor elevation, I glowered at the cityscape spread out before me and spun my dreams of escape and autonomy. But even in spring, even when you are consumed with righteous rage, the Bengali sun is hard to tolerate too long. After a couple of hours, I had to sit down to seek solace in solitude with a favorite book.

Passing through the central lobby on the third floor, into which the rooms opened, I came to a sudden halt. On a corner table sat a plastic shopping bag, the kind our servants took to the market. How it came to be there I could not fathom, since the kitchen and dining areas were on the second floor. But there it was, a bag bulging with objects, and I had to investigate. Inside were two bunches of red-leaved notey (a common leafy vegetable), small packets of spices done up in newspaper and twine, a bunch of small bananas, and a cluster of golapijams. Almost involuntarily, I picked one up and brought it to my nose. The golapijam gets its name from its scent—the exquisite scent of the rose, called golap in Bengali. A literal English translation of the fruit would be “rose-berry.” Like the jamrul, its color is a pale whitish green, but the edible skin is opaque and slightly rough. If you rattle it vigorously, you can feel the loose seed moving about inside. Before I knew what had happened, half the fruit was in my mouth, filling it with a delicate sweetness that went beyond words. Half terrified and half delighted, I swallowed the mouthful before realizing how unsafe it was to stand there and be discovered feasting instead of fasting as soon as somebody came to retrieve the bag. Quickly, I ran to my room, but not before I had stolen two more fruits from the bag. Behind locked doors, I could eat safely, and as I did, any fear I might have felt was replaced by a brazen satisfaction at having broken the rules without being found out. The feeling was even sweeter than the juicy flesh of the golapijam and, though I did not know it then, was the first deliberate expression of unorthodox impulses that plagued my family for years to come.

I can’t say doubt never raised its head. A teenager does not have unfailing resources of conviction. But I did have enough will to squelch the doubt and the fear of retribution that arose in moments of weakness. Perhaps it was the power of the monsoon rains—not merely that year, but over successive years—that washed away the lingering second thoughts by affirming the rightness of enjoying and satisfying the
To my mind, there is no other season like the Bengali monsoon. When the dark army of clouds rushes in from every corner of the sky, they convey an awesome sense of power—power that quenches the seemingly unending pain of summer in a few short hours. Through the three and a half months that the monsoon rules over Bengal, the rain comes and goes, just as the heat and humidity also rear their ugly heads. But that first extraordinary sense of liberation lingers for many weeks.

Among the many delectable offerings of the season are two small, piquant fruits, the *kalojam* and the *karamcha*. The unique taste of the *kalojam*, astringent, yet sweet, lingers long after the fruit has been eaten. As for its deep purple color, bordering on black (hence *kalo*, which means black in Bengali), it has a durability unmatched in the fruit kingdom. A pleasurable session of eating *kalojam* is advertised to the world for hours afterwards by a purple-stained tongue. In colonial times, there were many stories of the horrified reaction of the British sahib confronted by his subordinates’ darkly tinted lips and tongue. As a city girl, I ate only *kalojam* bought from the market. But watching the dark monsoon sky, I used to wonder whether it was indeed more pleasurable, as I had often read, to be outside the city, in a grove of *kalojam* trees, eating the ripe fruit that had fallen on the ground.

The other fruit of the monsoon, the *karamcha*, begins to appear at the tail end of summer but becomes abundant with the rains. Each year, its beauty struck me anew. The color, graduating delicately from white to blushing pink, is worthy of the pure oval of its form. Its tartness, though, demands a brave palate to consume it raw. Dipping it in salt makes it easier. Bengalis have found numerous ways to combine *karamcha* with fish and vegetables to produce classic dishes. The roe of the *hilsa* (the Bengali shad), delicious on its own, is singularly enhanced by the addition of this mischievously tart fruit. But as with the tart *topa-kul* in winter, the slow, rainy afternoons of the monsoon are ideal for savoring a salty, spicy pickle made from the *karamcha*. It is a surefire remedy for the inertia and lack of appetite that can occasionally ail one in the latter part of the monsoon season. Metamorphosed by salt, oil, and spices, it ironically evokes the dry heat of early summer and knocks you out of lassitude.

That may be why the folk imagination of Bengal invested the *karamcha* with magical powers to halt the rain. In the bustling urban landscape where I grew up, the idea was a charming absurdity. Even in my family, where religious rituals and observances were so important, there was little to connect us with the kind of beliefs that were deeply rooted in the soil. I remember going with my father to see *Pather Panchali*, the first film in Satyajit Ray’s Apu trilogy. In an unforgettable scene, little Apu and his teenage sister Durga are caught far from home in a violent monsoon downpour that looks like it will never end. They have no umbrella, no
shelter. Worse, they know they will face the wrath of their mother for having strayed too far from home. Desperate, drenched, shivering, and anxious about her little brother catching a chill, Durga repeatedly chants a nonsense rhyme that is supposed to put a stop to the deluge. It describes a karamcha sitting on a lime leaf and commands the rain to go away. Durga’s utter desperation is also the measure of her faith.

When we came out of the theater, I laughed at the absurdity of it. My father, the gentlest of men who hardly ever spoke harshly to me, gave me a look of anger and sadness. How could I know, he asked, what life was like in rural Bengal in the early part of the twentieth century, a time when telegraph poles or a fast-moving train were miraculous sights? Even later, during his own boyhood, when he spent school vacations in the village, he was impressed by the immense sense of difference conferred by place. It did not take long, he said, to lose the confidence of urban life, the sense of autonomy and control that came from having electricity, running water, transportation, telephones. In the rural world, the unpredictable and the uncontrollable were always present at the edge of consciousness. Nonsense rhymes were as good as anything else to get you out of trouble.

It was a humbling moment for me. I tried to visualize life in a time and a place so very different from my own. I imagined myself to be Durga, alone and far from home, under an open sky that poured sheets of water on me. I thought about getting lost, being sick. Yes, I would chant that rhyme too, with desperation, with belief. You had to believe in order to survive. The karamcha and the lime leaf were both magical and real.

Some years, the monsoon is cruel in Bengal. Instead of happy rejuvenation, it brings ruinous floods. Even the cities can be under protracted siege. From distant America, as I watch the news on television, I see the Bengali rain come down and transform city streets into streams, maroon people on roofs and treetops, engorge rivers so that they wash away villages and settlements. I think of all the young Bengali girls who may have invoked the blushing pink karamcha and the vivid green lime leaf to ward off the rain. I hold them close in my heart. ☞