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. Even in the years when the fruit came early and the goddess was unusually tardy, all we could do was watch sorrowfully as the mounds of rotting fruit piled up outside the markets, waiting to be taken away by the municipal garbage truck.

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
squeezed 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 the
briefest of springs to Bengal blow away the two kinds of kul
to make room for a couple of fruits that are exquisitely deli-
cate 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 forma-
tions. 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 golapjam (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
golapjam tempted me to sin willfully, thus beginning my
impulse that plagued my family for years to come.

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 sink downstairs 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 sec-
ond floor. But there it was, a bag bulging with objects, and
I had to investigate. Inside were two bunches of red-leafed
notey (a common leafy vegetable), small packets of spices
done up in newspaper and twine, a bunch of small bananas,
and a cluster of golapjams. Almost involuntarily, I picked
one up and brought it to my nose. The golapjam 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

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 succes-
sive years—that washed away the lingering second thoughts
by affirming the rightness of enjoying and satisfying the
senses. 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.