

# The Education of a Girl, 1951

Nandini Dhar

Baba's palms closed on hers like teeth slamming shut on bread. He steadied her fingers with his. They practiced aloud—the sounds of the letters again and again. He broke them apart, arranging alphabets one after another. Baba said: *that's how words are formed. An alphabet, when alone, is too brittle. Just like us.*

There weren't any primers inside their one-room house. Only her Baba's hands, the sound of his voice repeating the letters again and again. Primers morph alphabets into objects—red apples, purple balls, yellow-orange mangoes. There was nothing of that sort for her. What was there: a home-stitched notebook,

full of letters in Baba's hands. A long stickpin to point at them. Poke, poke and poke until the pages were full of holes. Her ma's stories buzzed in the holes of the wall. Trying to erase the sleep from the little ones' eyes. Shelling out Dalim Kumar's to ears too young to discern alphabets or syllables in words. Her Baba considered that murmur

a disruption. So did she. He said, *One day the letters will walk you out of the alleyway. Those old wives' tales won't.*