Catching Birds With Father

Bakul Banerjee

The morning frost glittered on forget-me-not patches trying hard to cling to crumbling red earth. That day, the lesson, as you planned the night before, would be to catch a witless swallow, a boy’s game you played long ago.

I was an enthusiastic participant in your re-plays. You told stories, funny ones, in exchange. I sifted through your tales searching for hints of your mother and father, who died when you were a child, hanging on you the badge named orphan.

I fetched Mother’s potato basket, small and sturdy, a short stick and a long rope. You tied the string around one end of the stick, propping the edge of the basket against the other end. I laid the rope straight and smooth on the dirt.

Golden grains of wheat glowed under the basket to lure birds in. With the other end of the string on my fingers, I waited, ready to tug it, knocking the basket over the swallow who might venture under it. You, reading the paper nearby, were supposed to be very quiet.

Did you smile inside, watching my folly? Were you teaching me a lesson? Swallows are smart. They flew away at the last minute. I never caught a bird, but I did notice when the frost turned into dew and forget-me-nots changed colors.