

# archipelago

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Book\*hug Press  
Toronto 2023

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**Archipelago** (/ˌɑːrkiˈpɛləɡoʊ/ ARK-ih-PEL-ə-goh), a cluster, collection or chain of islands, or sometimes a sea containing a small number of scattered islands.

*I am mere dust. The desert hides itself in me.  
Against me the ocean has reclined from the start.*

—Agha Shahid Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*

*prologue*

## all your grandmothers have stopped cooking

this is how we know the world is ending.

the grandmothers have set down  
their dois and there is no succession plan.  
the grandmothers are stubborn  
in their armchair naps, dogged in their deafness.  
committed to crosswords and iPads, days punctuated  
by scheduled medications and short-lived, rheumy rages  
about rain and satellite dish reception.

you will ask me for the family shalgham recipe.  
i will nod as though i have waited all my life for this, and  
i will launch whatsapp inquiries and google investigations  
seeking a legend to the map of your veins.  
i will ask whosoever still breathes and cares, whosoever  
holds fragments unbloodied with grudge.  
i will stitch the patchwork and call it our flesh.

we will not use mustard oil because it is banned  
in this country as well as unneighbourly. also because  
erucic acid will kill you. we will buy garam masala  
from the desi store, some sweaty stranger's measure of  
spices grown, ground and packaged in an undisclosed  
facility marginally closer to your so-called point of origin,  
misting carbon across oceans to get to you. i will cross-  
check whether a shalgham is a standard turnip or some  
other hyperlocal brassica, and fret over the algebra of red  
meat. beef is too tough, lamb too distracting, goat is rangy  
and what in god's name is mutton.

behind this, planet whispers  
sit like lead on the guilt gullet.

i will utter silent prayers over heat that spreads a circle  
across the glass-top stove and into the steel pot, feeble-  
bottomed but stout with on-my-honour promise to protect,  
no old-world cancer castaways on my watch.

and bhun. bhun like a grandmother, like your life depends  
on it.

if a shalgham is not bhuned  
and no grandmother is there  
to seize the doi from your  
hand, is it

still a shalgham?

we will sombrely proclaim this the alchemy of our  
dna. we will perfect the dish, imagining  
the grandmothers into a kodachrome era with brighter  
flavours, better fashion, more precise truths. tongues  
warmwagging, dois aloft.

we will set it on a bed  
of basmati, ignoring inner voices that ask which grains  
were collected and deposited en route. we will use forks  
because we have forgotten how to use fingers, and also  
because germs. we will imagine the future secure.

we will chew thoughtfully. we will summon every ounce  
of effort to enjoy this resurrection of memory, forgetting  
until a grandmother cackles, “*gonglu!*” between  
mouthfuls that they had a whole other word for it,

that there never was

a recipe.