

taking refuge in numbers

numbers are my defense:
facts are my armor;
statistics are my excuse;

i default to:

68.8% of Indians live on less than \$2 a day.
44.5% of girls in India are married before the legal age.
1.4 million children die before their fifth birthday.

now i'm "conscious." "aware."

because if i stick with the numbers,

the
faces
voices
will fade away,
i hope.

I ~~should not~~ want to forget:

the boy who called me, "Didi, didi," knocking on the car window, telling me he hadn't eaten for two days

the nursing woman clutching a naked baby boy with flies on his eyelashes who asked me for my French fries

the bony girl with the faded red ribbon in her hair and trying to sell me a balloon because "*khana cahie, Didi, khana...*": needing food, sister, food.

the thin, hunched man with the walking stick who leaned against the car and smiles warmly at me and brings his hands together in a beseeching gesture

nine-year-old Devyani screaming for her mother, who beat her and threatened her if she came back home

when Manju asks me on my last day at the village school when I will come back

when Sheetal admits she doesn't like to go home because her dad drinks too much and doesn't let her go outside

when Gita tells me that she'll be married in a year to a 35-year-old man and she's my age right now

when the village head of Hatnur, Uday ji, tells me that girls are married off by the age of fifteen, because otherwise they might run off with a boy of their choice

i don't want to remember them. Because eight thousand four hundred miles away, here I sit, writing and pondering, in a building with running water and food to cook and a bed to sleep in and a roof over my head.

I exist in a place where I cannot exist with them. So that's why I think about the numbers instead:

the numbers obscure their experiences; they conceal what I've seen and heard—
the faces, the stories, the individual realities.