"My grandfather had lighted lamps of wealth everywhere," wrote Rabindranath Tagore, Indian philosopher and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, "but they went out with him. All that remained of that festival of wealth were the soot marks from the burnt lamps, ash, and a single quivering and weak flame."

Sixty-five years after Tagore's death, that flame still lights an entire street in Calcutta. At dusk, six massive columns bearing a red-painted Greek gable tower up before us—a building as imposing as the White House, hidden in an alley so narrow that no two cars can pass each other. Schoolgirls move past the columns, a swelling sea of black braids, red hair bands, and starched uniforms; market women squat on the sidewalk, a handful of mangos and withered bunches of beans spread out before them.

Kamalika Bose points to a crumbling tower alongside the house: musicians used to play there, and the people in the garden behind the high wall and on the street would listen. "Close your eyes," she says, "and you can still hear them." Across and down from the white palace of Tagore House there is another surprise: a medieval castle, only a few hundred meters from the Ganges. The walls are sheathed in a spider web of electric cables, advertisements cover the windows, and additions bulge from the house like tumors. Yet the oriels, turrets, and castle gate are still clearly visible: in 1850, the architects of Martin Burn & Co. built Tagore Castle for the merchant Kali Krishna Tagore, modeling it after a fortress in the Scottish Highlands.

Bose shakes her head. "In any other city of the world it would be something special to have your office in a building like Tagore Castle. Here, they use it to store scrap iron and fabrics." Tagore House and Tagore Castle do not even appear in the travel guides. Nor do any of the other great merchant palaces in the north of the fifteen-million metropolis of Calcutta—though it was in these salons that the Bengal Renaissance, an intellectual, political, and spiritual renewal in late eighteenth-century India, was born. Only the marble palace of the Mallick family, with its "curious accumulation of Western art," is occasionally mentioned. Anyone who wants to understand the north needs another guide.

Kamalika Bose is twenty-six. She wears jeans and a long white cotton kurta, and her hair is pulled back into a braid. Sitting in traffic in the sweltering heat, she sometimes curls up like a cat with her knee under her chin and types text messages into her cell phone with long, slender, lightning-fast fingers. Like many Bengali women, her eyes are nearly black. And even in the worst heat, she never sweats; her breath just grows shallower.

She says that for twenty years, she paid almost no attention to the north part of the city. She comes from a middle-class family, and the schools she attended as well as the galleries, cinemas, shops, and cafés where she and her friends would meet were all located in central and south Calcutta, in the former British cantonment or the new suburbs where the software companies and call centers sit ensconced in their glass skyscrapers. For the middle class, the north means crooked alleys, crumbling walls, and stinking markets. Not until she studied architecture in Ahmedabad—about a thousand