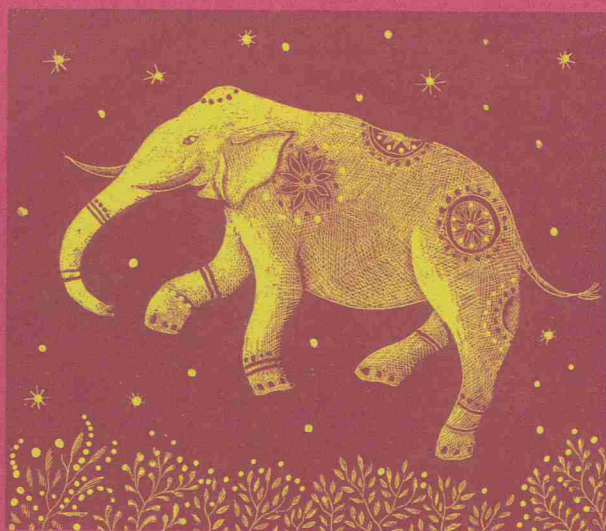
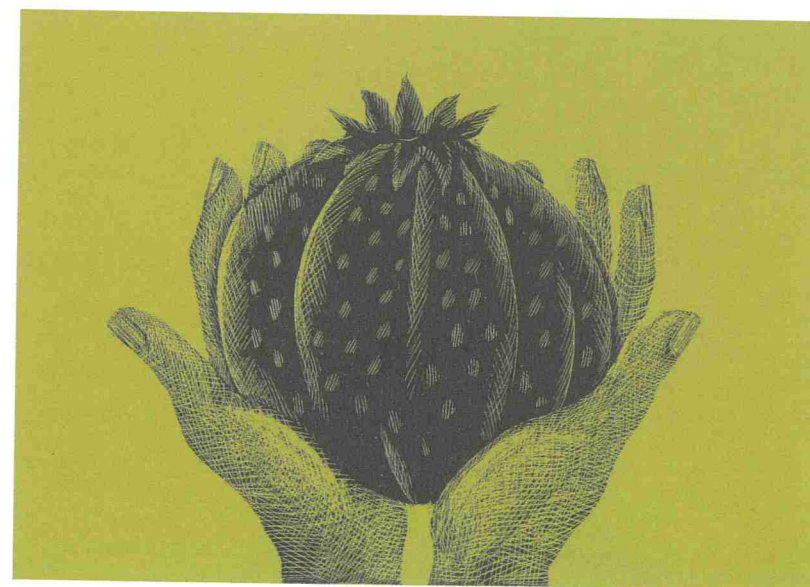


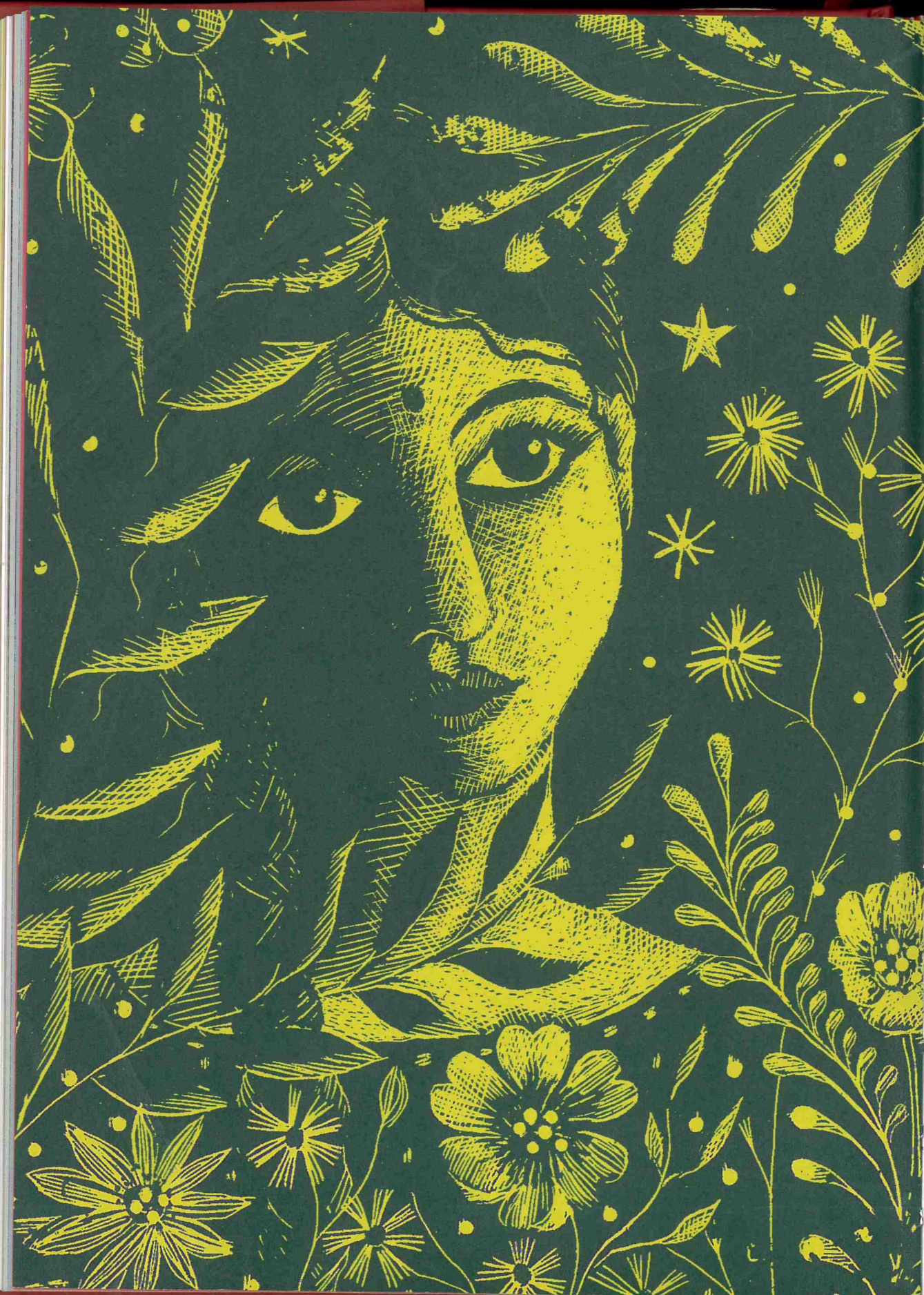
THE HEAVENLY ELEPHANT



This Indian story follows in the tradition of many folktales where the moral is a light-hearted warning against greed and foolishness: the most famous of these is probably The Goose that Laid the Golden Egg, a fable by Aesop. I love the idea of the great elephant crashing down through the trees, and lumbering around the garden in the moonlight.

Jasmine worked in the Raja's beautiful garden and had the greenest fingers in the whole of India. At her touch the tiniest seeds and the weediest plants blossomed and flourished. She loved her job and worked hard from dawn until dusk growing the most colourful flowers and succulent fruit.





There wasn't much Jasmine didn't know about gardens, but there was one thing that puzzled her. Night after night, the very best fruits were being eaten by something or someone. She didn't know if it was big or small, bird or beast. The Raja was beginning to complain and so one night she decided to stay late and try to find out who, or what, was stealing the fruit.

As the light began to fade she hid behind a lotus tree and settled down to wait. The hours passed. The moon rose. The garden was full of mysterious sounds – scamperings in the undergrowth and rustlings in the treetops. Jasmine was tired and hungry, and just a little bit



scared. She wanted to go home to her brothers and sisters, and her auntie and her grandpapa, but still she kept watch.

Her head was just beginning to nod, when suddenly the peace of the night was shattered by an ear-splitting crash. Jasmine jumped awake and peered out nervously from behind the tree.



An enormous elephant had fallen from the heavens and landed in the moonlit garden! Jasmine watched, amazed, as the mighty creature roamed around, happily picking the tenderest shoots and the ripest fruit from the trees with his long grey trunk. Despite its great size, the elephant moved delicately and carefully and the garden was not damaged at all.

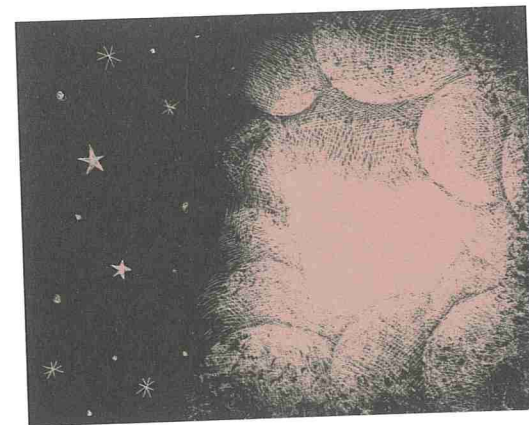
Eventually, when the elephant had eaten enough, he looked up into the night sky and prepared to leave. Quick as lightning, and without really thinking, Jasmine grabbed hold of his tail and hung on as the elephant soared upwards towards the





stars. Up and up they flew, rushing through the inky night sky, the wind whistling in Jasmine's ears and her hair streaming behind her. The elephant had no idea she was there, hitching a ride – she was a skinny little thing and light as a feather.

Jasmine clung on for dear life, her eyes tightly shut. After what seemed an age, they slowed and she opened one eye. They passed the seventieth star and beyond she saw great billowing clouds, bathed in a glorious pink light. It looked like heaven!



The elephant flew through a great archway in the clouds and landed with a gentle bump. Jasmine let go of the elephant's tail and gazed around her, open-mouthed with astonishment.



They had arrived in another garden – but this one was very different from the one belonging to the Raja. Everything here was made of silver and gold, of precious jewels and glittering gems. And everything was huge, much bigger than on earth.

Great silver trees dripped with huge mangos made of amber. There were golden oranges the size of ostrich eggs and big crystal roses that sparkled like frost.

The elephant still seemed not to notice Jasmine and lay down under the golden boughs of a cherry tree hung with ruby fruit

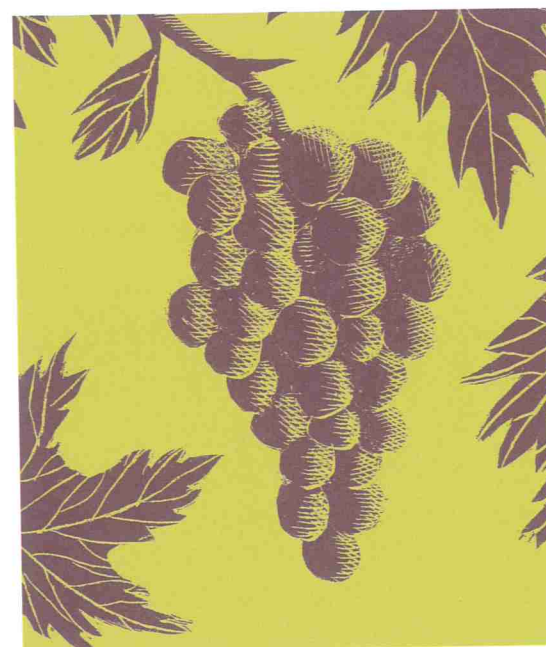


to sleep off his meal from the Raja's garden on earth.

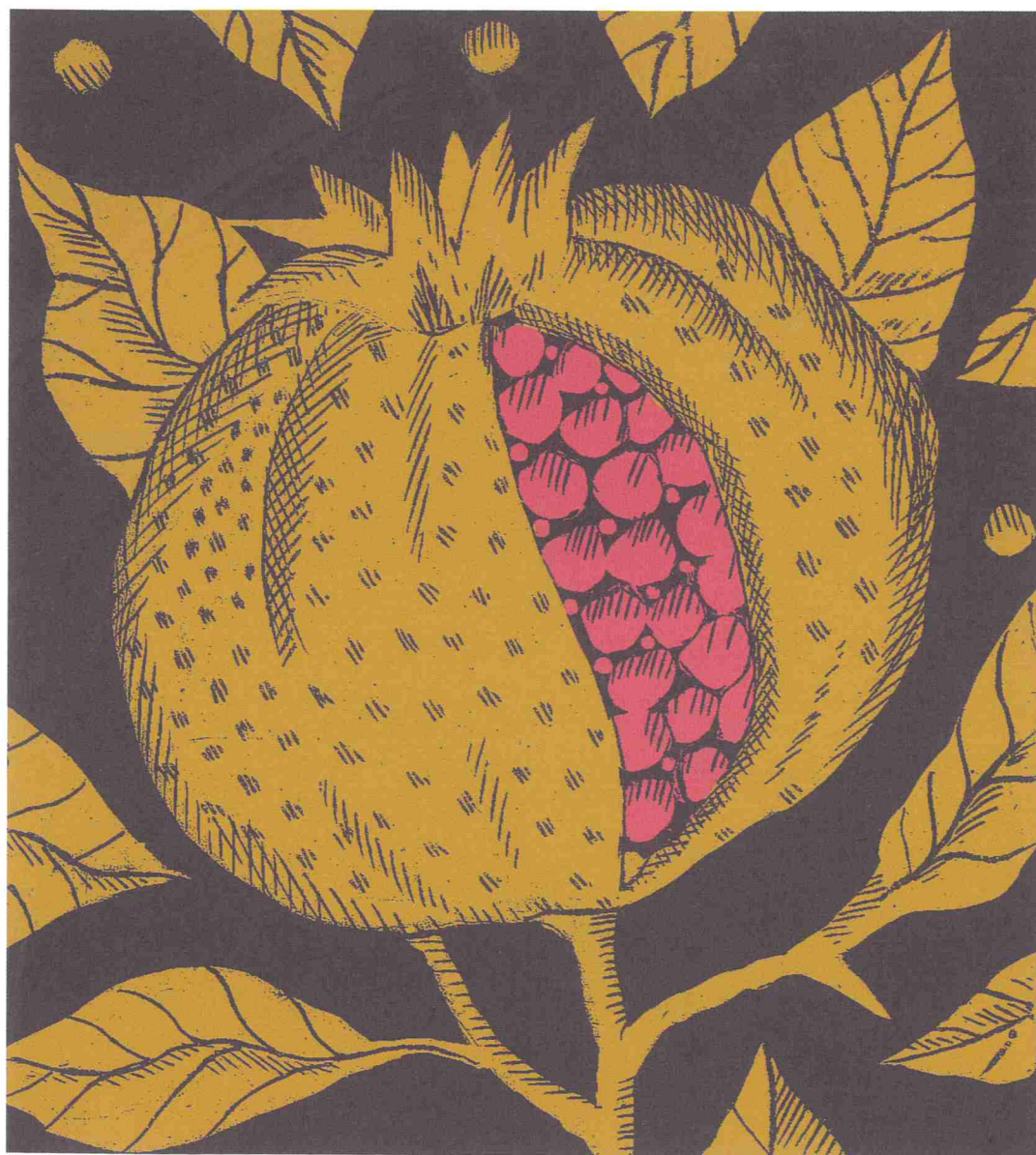
Jasmine wandered around the garden. She reached up to pick a plum, the size of her hand, but when she tried to bite it, she realised that it was made of amethyst, and not a sweet juicy fruit at all. Truly this was an astonishing and magical

place, but Jasmine could quite see why the elephant would prefer the fruit in the Raja's garden.

But think how wealthy she could be if she took some of these jewels back



to her family! She didn't earn much for all her hard work in the Raja's garden and she had four little brothers and sisters to keep. And there was Auntie Ameena with her bad back, and Grandpapa Imran with his weakening sight – just think how much better life could be if she filled her pockets with a few of these precious jewels!



She ran around the garden picking emerald grapes and sapphire blueberries, and a great golden pomegranate stuffed with ruby seeds.

At sunset the elephant lumbered to his feet once more, and flew back to the Raja's garden with Jasmine clinging to his tail.

As soon as they landed Jasmine ran home to her family. They were worried because they hadn't seen her since the previous morning, but when she showed them the precious fruits they did a dance all around the kitchen!

"Where did you get these?" asked Hassan.

"Are there any more?" asked Bashir.

"Will you go again?" asked Naimah.

"Can I come with you?" asked Shabina.

"All right! All right!" laughed Jasmine.

"I'll take you tonight, but you mustn't



breathe a word of this to anyone – it must be our secret!”

They all promised not to tell, but later that evening when Hassan went to fetch water from the well he saw his best friend Ajit. “It won’t hurt to tell Ajit,” thought Hassan. “After all, he is my very best friend ...”



So, swearing him to secrecy he whispered the whole story into Ajit’s ear. Well, Ajit could scarcely believe it. He was so astonished by Hassan’s story that he went straight home and told his mother, who told Mrs Aziz, her neighbour, who told her cousin, Bakool.

And before very long, everybody in the town had heard about the Mighty Elephant and the Jewelled Gardens of Heaven.

At sunset, there they all were, standing at the Raja’s garden gate, chattering excitedly about what they had heard, about the huge emeralds and diamonds, the enormous garnets and sapphires, and demanding to be taken to the magical gardens.



They wouldn't go away and poor Jasmine had no choice but to agree that they could all go with the elephant when he returned to the Jewelled Gardens of Heaven.

With great difficulty, they all hid themselves in the bushes and behind the trees of the Raja's garden until, with a great crash, the heavenly elephant landed once again by the mango tree.

Everyone watched in awe as he delicately roamed around the garden plucking bananas and apples, pears and oranges. When he had eaten his fill of fruit and was about to leave, Jasmine grabbed hold of his tail. Hassan grabbed Jasmine's hand, who took Bashir's, who



grabbed Auntie Ameena's. Auntie Ameena held on tightly to Deepak, who held on to cousin Bakool, who held firmly on to little Kali. They all held tight as the Heavenly Elephant took off and climbed higher and higher into the deep blue sky. He appeared not to notice the great trail of people behind him.

He climbed further and further away from the Raja's garden, closer and closer to heaven.

He had just passed the seventieth star when Cousin Bakool whispered to Deepak, "Tell me again how big the golden oranges are in the heavenly garden?" Deepak couldn't remember so he asked Auntie Ameena. She in turn



asked Bashir, who asked Hassan.

"Jasmine," whispered Hassan, "how big did you say the golden oranges are?"

"Wait and see," said Jasmine. "We'll be there soon and you can see for yourself."

But Cousin Bakool couldn't wait. "Tell me now!" he said.

"They are as big as ostrich eggs," said Jasmine.

But Cousin Bakool had never seen an ostrich egg. "How big is that?" he called up the line, to where Jasmine was concentrating on holding on to the elephant's tail.

Exasperated, Jasmine said, "They are about this big!" and she held out both hands to show the size of the golden

oranges, letting go of
the elephant's tail.

And she, and
Hassan, and Bashir,
Auntie Aameena,
Deepak, Cousin
Bakool and little
Kali, and all the other
friends and relations
and neighbours,
tumbled head over
heels and back down
to earth and they
never did get to see
the Jewelled Gardens
of Heaven.

