

Beneath the Skin of Our City

Somewhere beneath the painted skin of our city, the
clay of a disappeared village continues to hide where
we once walked upon the wind and played our carbon
breath, until the sun dried our day with golden embers.

A cluster of huts, the leaf pillows on which life could
sleep, watching the passing of bullock carts filled with
fresh harvest, their bells a coral reef of cheers, and the
tribal women with pots of fresh water on their tattooed
heads and in salty armpits, a mile or two under their
feet, their silver smiles full but thirsty, wishing to bring
the river near to their lips.

An ageless banyan tree, the living ancestor that had
seen it all, inventing a playground of every possibility,
and under its cool shade, we rejoiced in treasures
of pebbles, goat-skin drums and ripe jamuns, gathering
songs from surrounding mountains and turning rocks
into urinals, unaware that in the journey of time, that
land—that land of many stories—was our kindergarten.

A child-care centre now stands in the middle of the city,
dust-proofed, child-proofed and defined by the codes of
allergy etiquette, and within its air-conditioned walls, a
pot of childhood hunts for space and spills away
monthly budgets of two dozen mums, who have never carried

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water pots on their salon-assisted heads or in perfumed
armpits, their journey wheeled by four-wheelers.

A teacher with a big tongue is trying to travel on a
textbook; a girl, with a TV grown in her head, eyeing
an audience of electronic animals; a boy, a half-piece
of man wearing a branded underwear, pouring private
grief over a cut in pocket money; and the rest, seeking
some fun in listening, and thinking of tests, re-tests
and project works.

There is a silence stronger than a scream in the pot
that spreads far outside, in the melting grey of clouds,
where a mentally naked face, with a little piece of me,
is recycling any unfinished business of life and play,
and searching for stories that have aged under the
clay of our village.

The Atoms in the Street

The street sleeps in the conference of night
a slow death
its noises nothing more than heartbeats in a womb
a car or two, carcasses of steel, swallowed by
viscous carbon in the humid air.

A half-naked beggar boy
squats on the pavement
his reedy fingers holding a science book
scavenged from a big rubbish bin
and the mayor of the city smiles on the bin poster
promoting a recycle campaign
exploding across the city's brightly illuminated skyline.

In the faint glow of the street lamp
shared by summer moths and a pregnant dog
the boy, a surging river of curiosity
runs through the pages of the book
pausing to breathe colourful pictures of atoms,
test tubes, Einstein and the cosmos.

We are all made of atoms—he struggles to read a line
and overwhelmed by the secret of all secrets,
brings his dirty palm closer to his eyes to spot any
big atom, thinking of the connection between him
and the privileged people living behind the walls

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of their air-conditioned homes in the street, but
made of atoms just like him.

A bag of tattered clothes—his uncle—
spits a few atoms in boy's palm, his mouth a rotting fruit
his hand shaking a broken beer bottle
and the boy sees red atoms gushing from
his scabbed knees.

The science again rests among the garbage
the boy hauls himself into the bin
to start his search for petty treasures
his inner river now a dry bed in the co-ordinates of
time, space and reality, trying to recycle Einstein from the book.

And the mayor still smiles
the moon, a white coin above the city's skyline, smokes clouds
and a loud yelp from the dog declares
atoms from its womb are ready to roll in the street.

Eating People in a Corporate Jungle

A suit with silver in his hair
thinks outside the box
and eats his colleagues within the walls of his cubicle
legally but unethically
with lethal dentures fabricated from
initiatives called rightsizing, smart-sizing and cost-cutting measures
implemented across all business segments
of his odd Corporate jungle.

With a few clicks of mouse
he manipulates statistics, scorecards, organisational obesity and paradigm shifts
and with his shrewd, predatory skills, he selects his victims
to push poisonous deadlines or blames through their throats
ignoring if they are emotionally alive or dead
or if they deserve to be professionally assassinated and eaten.

‘Excellence in shotgun approach’
a motivational poster declares on a wall near his cubicle
and above it, a security camera monitors him
as he monitors his victims’ struggle and transformation into stress puppies
using the input from
his underground network of spies and loyal Corporate rats
ready to help in arranging the *funeral* formalities
under the full blessings of a cold-hearted management team
wanting to radically boost
the company’s bottom line and maximise shareholder value.

Employees across the entire range of Corporate jungle
have become the victims of the *suit*
—seagull managers, happy hippos, snake oil salespersons,
mischievous chimpanzees, territorial foxes, adaptable chameleons,
sacred cows and even a few well-fed elephants and lions—
and he hasn't experienced allergies, diarrhoea, constipation or haemorrhoids
or vomited any half-eaten pieces in embarrassment.

To his credit, the *suit* creates meticulous tombs in his files
with epitaphs littered with bureaucratic insults such as
—deadwood, misfit in skills ecosystem, redundant, not up to mark,
bleeds our organisation, can't handle customers...—
whatever he finds it cool and convenient to use from a helicopter view
to justify his engineered, absurd massacre.

Deep inside his heart, however,
he believes he is a victim too
tortured many times in the boardroom and boss's office
scolded and assaulted with weapons of humiliation and threats
but no matter what, he has to survive
to feed his family at home
by continuing his mission
to chase the Corporate targets and deliverables
hiding his own wounds and high blood pressure.

In the eyes of the Management,
the *suit* is a hardworking, utterly dedicated creature

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—a game changer—

whose services will be sought until the time will come
when a new, stronger creature will be nurtured and ordered to eat him
and a tomb will be created in a file
in the memory of that *suit*
with a refurbished jungle
and re-defined vision, mission, values, goals and policy frameworks
across the business segments
that are probably rightsized, smart-sized and cut to the bones
singing the songs of success to its shareholders
and boasting about human capital and Corporate Social Responsibility.

The games and the bloodshed in the jungle
continue...

A Modern Woman

In the battlefield of a metropolis, where she
performs acts of multiple existence,
someone from her inner universe wanders
everywhere around her, barefoot and restless, like a spirit
from a freshly covered grave, wanting to
liberate the secrets hidden under her skin,
rearranging lines of relationships
that had bled her heart through the knives of betrayal;
her wounds infected by the micro-organisms
of time and civilisation disorder brought about
by digital evolution and unpaid credit card bills.
A lawyer, a teacher, a mother, a dreamer, a
somebody, a nobody—just a human;
searching for a soul lost during the journey
since the day sky cried on her;
since the day she has been looking for oxygen
and some space to keep going...
and going, wondering when she turned woman from a girl.

Mourning in a Funeral Parlour

In an air-conditioned funeral parlour,
I stared at a death, cold as clay, framed in a coffin.
The man in his forties,
my fifth best friend in the descending order during school days, to be precise,
lay with his face exposed, his body covered in a cloth.
His liver had betrayed him,
after battling alcohol, cigarettes and stuff that did not need any mention.
His wife distributed packets of drinks and peanuts,
checking whether anyone wanted more;
his small kids chatted about their birthday parties;
and people talked about the nearest food centre.
I felt I was a misplaced mourner,
arrived with false expectations of cries and tears in the eyes.
As I sat at a table, destroying the messages of condolences in my mind,
thinking it would be rude to bring the formal sadness in the hall,
a heap of peanut and a drink appeared on the table.
The man was gone, deservedly,
and soon, I had to leave,
I had to ask where I could go for lunch without appetite.