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CW 100

The Gray City

Streets with more people

than seems should be physically possible.

Everywhere you look, a new set of eyes

staring back at you. Some a quick glance.

Others longer, pleading, jealous of you in your

air-conditioned car, safe from the scalding ground

boring holes in your already calloused feet,

walking on a bed of nails. Sweat not dripping

but pouring down your face, staining your wrinkled,

way too small hand-me-downs, blotched with different fabric

from different times, desperately trying to cover patches

you knew were all too visible, each patch telling a new story;

safe from all that.

You stare back, their focused gaze holding you hostage,

unable to look away. You shy away, eyes falling to your

new mobile phone, not something you need, something you want,

something they will never have. A moment passes and you look up,

hesitantly but surely. You want to do something, to reach out,  
to help, to offer them something, anything.

You reach for your wallet, a selfless act, charitable,  
but you know better. You know those 500 rupees will soon  
find their way into a roadside shop, exchanged for a cheap bottle  
of whiskey and a pack of cigarettes, wasted greedily for a small  
chance to forget their unfair circumstance, forget their skinny children  
with bones poking through their skin, forget the faint rumbling  
and the light-headedness that never goes away.

You know better.

This is New Delhi.

A gray city, I like to call it.

A color that is neither here nor there,

black nor white, but somewhere

stuck in the middle. An apt description

for a place with cloudless, colorless skies,

blue being a rare reward, but one that makes it

so much prettier, grabbing your attention, forcing

you to appreciate it lest it leave once more, all too soon.

Delhi is, in many ways, right in the middle.

Huge mansions furnished with expensive paintings, marble floors,  
staircases spiraling upwards to rooms with flat-screen TVs lining the walls,  
more than you could ever use, massive glass doors showing off  
luscious backyards, dotted with exotic flowers of every color you could  
name and more, complete with swing set, patio chair, gilded fountain  
and the likes. Mansions situated, almost mockingly, right next to  
even larger slums. Slums housing tens of thousands of people,  
all cramped into tiny, mud and cow dung huts, roofs of straw  
working hard to block some of the piercing sun, the smell of  
shit, animal and human alike, greeting the residents like an old friend,  
seldom on the brink of being forgotten, yet often enough that it lashes out,  
making its presence known to the unwary nostril- crinkling in remembrance  
of their unwanted acquaintance.

This is home.

Home is where I learned many things, things that

I may never use again but would not be me without,

and hence things I am grateful for.

I know now how to pick from a huge pot of chicken

the piece that would be most juicy, most tender,

most delicious. I know that nothing is more satisfying

than the salty crunch of hot pakoras coupled with

spicy masala chai and a new book on a dreary,

rainy evening. I can recite, absentmindedly, the best roads

to take when the Monsoon season hits, experience having taught me

what areas would be flooded with gross, untreated sewage spewing

from clogged drains. I can navigate the confusing crisscross of metro

lines that, to an untrained eye, look like the random scribbles of a kindergartner.

I can haggle an Auto Rickshaw driver asking for prices far too high,

tell you the least suspicious street food vendors in any locality,

teach you how best to eat a mango with nothing but your hands,

help you pick the perfect kurta to accent the color of your skin

and match that of your eyes.

I can even tell you what time best to visit

my infamous gray city so the monotone is replaced with a

vivid palette and the resigned look of my massive family

is restored to cheerful bliss and whoops of joy.

And I love home.