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Hey man, calm down!

To understand is to tremble.
Harold Brodkey, *Innocence*

Shacks, crows, heat, the incessant honking of car horns – Calcutta. There are cities that vanish when one enters them. Faces small large brown white above below all around. Hands writhing at the bus window, shouts, turbans, WW2 rifles, men pulling rickshaws, the honking of horns. Bunsen burners, concrete structures, bamboo scaffolding, people all over it like ants. Honking, traders, screams. The baggage wallah is chest-high, wrinkled face, fantastically alert eyes. Here, one must move as he does, elegantly, with natural ease, but on dust, in the dirt. Strength decides who gets through.

Calcutta, Communist for over 30 years, has been a city without a hinterland since the partition of India, cut off from the jute plantations in Bangladesh, a city in industrial decline. Slow compared to Bombay, positively small with “only” 12 million (registered) inhabitants. A proud city adorned with myths and slogans. I recognize the red star graffiti, the heroic faces of Bengali freedom fighters. Beside them, Mother Theresa or one of the many Hindu goddesses. Radiant halos. Ideology.

Calcutta, a lethargic onslaught. A tale of overpowering, a tale the city presents to its visitors, enveloping them in it, but which it also directs against itself, over and over, a spiral turning inwards, into the heart. Created by mass and history, habit, heat and mud.

A city with no beginning, no end. Calcutta can be constantly felt smelled tasted touched – only the eye sees almost nothing for sheer abundance. The airport is called Dum Dum thanks to its location next to the munitions factory where the bullets were made. Water lilies drift on open sewers, bougainvilleas blossom, people and crows rummage through huge mountains of rubbish. The cry of an Indian cuckoo. Small green berries spread on cloths at the roadside, a drove of pigs gallop after a cow, huge hand-painted advertisements on iron frames reach into the air. Beneath them, someone rolls himself round a traffic bollard to sleep. I feel like a big white dairy cow. In the grimy window of the bus, a tin-clad wooden crate, the Danube appears, a thin blue arm, the horizon of home, as seen just hours ago from the plane. Honking, shacks, cars. I am here. But where am I?

“Calcutta lies on the Ganges” warbles an old German pop song. Not so! Calcutta lies in the mud of an arm of the Ganges called the Hooghly. The city stretches along its right bank from north to south. In the middle, like a kraken, sat the British at Fort William, a large military installation surrounded by the empty expanse of the Maidan. Today, goats graze the stubbly brown grass, expressway traffic roars past, it actually looks quite peaceful. But the Maidan never was just a park, it was always a stratagem on the part of the British, to keep the “brown” city at arm’s length. It also served as a firing range. Today the fort is occupied by the Indian army – keeping it at arm’s length, this brown city of the Muslims, of the Bangladeshis, of the ...?

Calcutta, a village, until the British established one their trading posts here at the end of the 17th century. The village soon grew into the capital of the British-Indian empire, a hub for the trading and manufacture of colonial wealth. In 1911, the British moved to Delhi because Calcutta was confronting them with too much desire for freedom. They left behind their houses,

their administrative structures, their language. Their railway station, a massive Victorian brick building in red and white, sees countless thousands flow through it day and night. The same applies to their libraries, finely sculpted townhouses, schools in an oriental version of Art Deco, and hotels. One half of a Palladian-style villa that once belonged to an art collector now serves as a museum. The other half, approved for residential use years ago, stands in ruins. Is that tranquillity or brutality?

Fort William, the Maidan and the luxury Oberoi Grand Hotel, full of white sausages that sizzle by the pool, waited on by staff in liveries straight out of a Hollywood wardrobe, the shopping arcades and cafés. Anyone who thinks this is the centre of Calcutta is mistaken. Anyone who believes the centre of this city – an inaccessible fort surrounded by a firing range – is empty like the centre of Tokyo is mistaken. Calcutta has no centre. Calcutta is an elongated thread, colourful, meandering. Part of it has a subterranean level with India's only underground railway – a middle-class enclave, a dark object of prestige, clawed from the dirt in untold hours of human toil, since each monsoon covered the tunnels with a fresh layer of Ganges mud. The opening time of 3pm on Sundays shows how artificial it is, for in Calcutta, life on the streets never stops. Never does the frying and baking on the pavements come to an end, the slaughtering at the markets, the shoving and touching, the swaying of the head that means neither yes nor no.

Mosques in the north, temples in the south, veiled women here, goats sacrificed to Kali there. The north is also home to Chinatown, and the south has English clubs for the rich. But the house of the wealthy Tagore family lies in the heart of the north, the Hindu-Muslim red-light district is in the north, likewise the university with its famous bookstalls that make the bouquinistes in Paris look like fleas before elephants. Heterogeneity, peaceful coexistence, ardently defended. But in early 2002, the newspapers are filled with pictures of burning Muslims, of mobs and acts of vengeance, of Hindus with rifles. Gujarat is far away, say some. How awful, say others. In the evening, a wedding procession in the street. In front of the groom, young men dance high-up on a decorated float. Drums, alcohol and hash. Suddenly loud shouting, a fight. People here have a reputation for being excitable, first shy, then emotional, and someone says: Calcutta, City of Madmen. Hey man, calm down! In cars, on the pavements, on the bus – you hear it everywhere.

Calcutta means bazaar and motion, religion and mud. Its true landscape consists of the canyons, reefs, crusts, cliffs and precipices formed by the pavements. This is where people do their roasting, peeling, humbling, winning, scratching, squabbling, loving, trading, thinking, praying, cursing. At the temple of Kali, shoes must be removed. The ground is spongy, soft, sodden with the blood of the morning's sacrificed goats. One may watch, even as a foreigner, but not take pictures. No media to commune with the mediums of the gods. Kali's hips are encircled by a belt of human skulls. In a murderous frenzy, she nearly kills her husband Shiva. When she recognizes him, she pauses and pokes out her tongue in shame. So it is said. In the temple, this tongue is long and golden, reaching almost to the floor. To lap up blood? The smaller of two goats is gripped by its legs, laid on the chopping block. A sharp cut. How densely packed the neck is, red and white. How long the body goes on twitching. Later, outside the temple wall, the butcher casts aside the gall and the guts. The small chunks of meat, the recognizable parts.

Calcutta is a city that vanishes, but it reappears when night falls, transformed by a yellow light, warm and thick. The Maidan is quiet, less traffic. Under the crumbling arcades, packs of dogs sleep with people dotted among them. A power cut. One dog paces up and down, up and down, as if caged. Beneath the aerial roots of the banyan tree lies a stone from the river, hung with a garland of flowers. Like this, the stone *is* Shiva, primal god, creation, male and female in one. Magic seems close. The gods are many. The Ganges still. The night soft. The call of the cuckoo.

Every November, the city plunges itself into a collective ecstasy for several days. As many as 2500 temporary temples are set up in the streets. Kali chops off heads. Prayers, dancing, celebration. On the last evening of Kali Puja, lorries stuffed with shouting, drumming men speed to the river. In their midst, a tightly bound, brightly lit goddess. Behind them, a lorry with their wives. Thousands of people line the filthy ghats, their feet in the sludge and in the glitter that decorated the larger-than-life figures shaped from Ganges mud. Then, one after the other, the goddesses drift downstream. Children dive underneath to see if anything saleable is attached to them. At this time of year, in February, the well-rounded figures are half-finished, sticky grey bodies put out to dry in the sun. In the eyes of those who talk about the festival in November, a sparkle is already visible.

Two bridges connect the city's riverbanks. The older is 450 metres long, suspended on pillars, as big as Sydney Harbour Bridge, but busier: Howrah Bridge, the eye of the needle leading to the station, the vein of the city. Photography is forbidden here too, for military reasons. The British like to use the word *maelstrom* when they talk about Indian history. What a human *maelstrom* one is faced with here. Face after face after face, as if it were a movie. The bridge quakes, the river drags itself along down below. There are people lying on the ground, asleep, ill, dying, perhaps. The crowd flows around them – the mountainous grey soles of their feet would have impressed even Caravaggio. Anyone here to admire the engineering will run into people. A torrent of bodies, overwhelming, close, expressionless, as if no one can see me. Maybe that is what makes this surging in a single direction, fast, purposeful and wordless, so difficult to grasp as reality. Or maybe our kind, unaccustomed to being particles in such a crowd, so small, so little, such a millionth part, lose our sense of reality when stuck into it and expected to walk to its rhythm – forced to walk, herded animals.

Beneath the bridge, miserable dwellings, but also unexpected access to the river. Cows, a paved square where people are sitting, standing, sleeping. Young men wash themselves in the Hooghly. Further out a boat, its black sails hoisted. Although far from idyllic, this place is like a bubble of quietness and time. On the opposite bank, the hectic rush of the railway station. Over here, washing, praying, resting. Mindfulness and religion. Things people bring with them from their days. Things to be washed away.

On my last evening, I look down from the flat room of a high-rise block into the streets. On a neighbouring roof, a father and son are practising cricket. A storm is gathering. The arm of the Ganges glitters to the west. It fills the entire picture. To tremble? To understand?

On a power line diagonally below me sits a vulture, sizeable and serene.