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Growing Up Amid the Ruins and the Rains

Growing up in Udayagiri, my Utopia,
a sleepy, small town in central Odisha, India,
was just like growing up amid the ruins.

It was love that kept us alive. We
learnt early that one law that
binds or bends or fructifies all of us is love.

Mornings at Udayagiri. "*Akashvani*,
the news-reader Gouranga Charan Rath
welcomes you...." We merely listened

to the voice, imagined a pot-bellied
bald man with chicken-pox marks on his face
reading news while scrubbing his back.

Rains were awful, power cuts for
weeks, incessant rains, mountain rains
with thunder storm, eerie wind. Mother

was prepared with her kerosene stove
for a minimal meal of rice and *dalma*
with pickles and *papadam*, since her

soil-hearth was wet for days. The
open-drain in our courtyard, water
splashing, flooding like Mahanadi

in Cuttack, was a pleasure to us
and a never-ending penalty for our maid *Tintu-maa*
all the time scrubbing water with a broom and grumbling.

Time was flooding somewhere between yesterday
and today, amid our ancestral blessings of defeat
and loss. Is today an answer to yesterday?

Water lingered in *Siriki* dam, *Dugudi*, Christian mountain
Nua street, *Pathan* street, market square, *Mahaguda* street and
MMC hospital, the only one in the district

where doctors from the UK made occasional appearances
giving hope to the poor and *the* faith to the agreeable.
My youngest siblings were privileged to see the light of life there.

Hours and places, now beyond the recognition of time.
Like a speech dictionless, without a meaning.
Or, the nameless shrubberies of the Himalayas.

After days and days of rain, as the sun was
about to disappear from our faces, cockroaches
and dragon-flies taking over our kitchen

and bed-posts, we pretending with books
inside the compulsory mosquito-net,
one evening, Gouranga Charan Rath

again, “*Akashvani*...” From one end of
Udayagiri to another, *Mili bayani*’s or
Meraj baya’s rough hands exploding,

exploring the ruins of rain, marveling at
the town’s weak fortifications. The water was
receding everywhere—*Udayagiri, Daringbadi,*

Kumbharkupa, Kanabageri, Badanaju, Malikapori, Kalinga and
further down at *Bhanjanagar*. During such
nights, I never slept, just counting the legs

of a peeled-off bleached cockroach, perched like
a dinosaur on the top of my head
above the mosquito-net. Thinking of the

low-lying homes and flooded fields where
nothing grew except weeds, I sighed. That night
I almost heard the deep hollow words echo

inside my sister’s disturbed sleep, against
her dream of roaring waters, and half-drowned
voices of my dead brother and deceased

neighbours—*Babu, Guni, Bapuni*—the wailing
of their mothers in a sing-song voice.
And saw my mother’s loss of her only son

in her under-eye dark circles. As I
prepared myself for the lingering night’s sleep,
my sister whispered, “did you hear something?”

Pulling our pooled quilt over my face,
I said, “*didi*, you may sleep—Udayagiri is
safe now.” She had a reticent sleep.

At night, in the culmination of the rain, we could
perceive the stars, the moon, round and full,

wearing a romantic small rainbow tiara and enjoying

its embryonic telluric privileges while sketching
the disposed waters to the ambitious blue. Ambitious?
No, Udayagiri was far from all ambitions. Ambitious—it never is.

But the morning sun was. After months and
months of rain, an ambitious wintry sun.
Udayagiri had nothing to do with

the rich ancient maritime history of Odisha.
The damp, black evenings were like faces
of onus; the rainstorm of our sins

wailed in the form of jackals from the
mountains all around. In the photographs
of my insomniac eyes, the sounds of my hurt

wandered. I learnt the alphabet of silence and patience
without animosity, anger or pretense
from Udayagiri winters. Udayagiri, the Darjeeling of Odisha.

Were there only two seasons in Udayagiri? The rain and
winter? The ambitious sun always remained
lenient, hiding in the darkly-begotten womb of dense forests of
Kalinga Ghat.

Summer was the other name for Spring.
Beige birds sang pleasantly from behind the
leafless gulmohur trees, loaded with red flowers.

On my way from school, miming and nagging
a cuckoo to yell, forgetting her sweet voice.
I enjoyed that game. A game that makes

me livid now elsewhere in the metropolis.
My tissues are aerated with echoes of the
chirping birds of Udayagiri till today; I am christened.

I was christened. All along it has been there.
I feel its existence, but not sure of the
space it has occupied in my being.

Growing up among the ruins, patiently,
I have become mature in the art of frolicking
with my shadow till sundown. Each

dark night, it creeps under my door,
that feel of love and the sense of loss borrowed
from Udayagiri. I feel its rustle, but

cannot touch it. Sense its breath through
the walls, thinking of the walls of our
Golla Street house, the timeless patches on the

walls like illusory shadows of elephants,
zebras or a mad woman's ruffled head or
a dog barking or yawning. Breathing shadows.

In darkness I touch and feel the ruins.
Ruined pillars, archways, moth-destroyed wedding albums.
Sultry, sticky cream-powder-comb boxes. Detached parents and
sisters.

I draw a portrait on the sky. It senses
my anguish. The heavens descent with its quills.
Failing to get its clue, I sulk, shrivel and wilt.