

Before the next raindrop falls ...

A short story by Brahmanand S Siingh

Children congregate around the puddles and point to the reflection of their face crashing at the water's edge. The movie houses are full but nothing new is showing. The elections in this country add some excitement to life. But no new election is in sight. I myself am in the midst of a thousand existential tangles, but go on living a busy life.

I am traveling by a train and there is a drop of rainwater hanging from the railing of my window, straining its cohesion. Before the rains came, we were happier, but the calculators couldn't talk even then and the milk got spoilt after a few days.

On the table before the head surgeon, an etherized patient is spread like an evening sky. The patient is suffering from cancer of the squamous cell in his esophagus. His smile is wooden, his head is a jumble of a thousand and one extinct images from his past.

A dog has been knocked off by some speeding vehicle on the road a short distance across. It is lying by the side of the road. I try to forget that qualitative changes have occurred all around me. I try to forget so many other things as well. The deforestation, for example or the newspaper articles, the rumbling sound of the sea. The disease of the dead ancestors spread like fog though some cold city.

Marketing goes on. Semi-nude rustic woman keep moving like rain in the narrow lanes. It is darker by a few lesser degrees these days but dusks are still crepuscular. Heavy winged shapes invade in clusters so dense no light can seep through sometimes. Big soft circles of poisonous ideas envelop the subway holes. Again and again, at the beach, in the auto rickshaw, in the corridors of the hospital, I encounter familiar images of decay. The drop hanging from the railing has become larger.

Children leaning over the puddle a short distance away cry in joy. Newspaper vendor is doing brisk business. The head surgeon flips through the text. But it's all in hieroglyphs which have faded into gray like the sky. "We are in agreement that the operation is delicate."

On the dark balconies, a deadly perfume ... another catastrophe, originating from who knows where.

A little bird wobbles in the patient's mind as if it were dying. The head surgeon taps the tube he's going to insert against the X-ray photo to ascertain the size, his eyes gaze out as if into the middle of a Turner landscape. He wants to speak, a syllable vibrates within him like a muscle. He doesn't know what to do. He is luminous in his doubt and sadness. The patient has not responded to the morphine anesthesia.

Last week, the assistant shopkeepers lost their tongues. Mediocrity is filling the gorge in the centre of the city as fast as they can: but they can't keep pace with corruption. My own arms seem shorter today than were yesterday and I've noticed another physiological peculiarity – barefooted men in army dresses with three toes. On the main road, expectant teenagers queue up for no damn reason. When I asked why they were doing so, they only stared at me with vacant eyes from behind their plastic shrouds.

In the corridors of the hospital cartload of patients, each of whose attendants think theirs is the most important case. The nurses flicker in the dress like fluorescent bulbs. They waddle in and out of rooms on whose doors someone has written "No Admission". Sometimes, I wander in the corridors for hours without encountering anyone ... then deep within the hospital bowels, I come upon the head surgeon. We nod to one another. He seems busy. The proper experiments are being undertaken by the proper authorities, we are told.

Images flutter around my head. They have long tapering heads, which make them look as if they are wearing nightcaps. They change color continually: red flame yellow, butterfly blue. One of them carries a dangerous laser beam, which it occasionally fires at my head in brief malicious bursts. I have gradually learned to recognize it and to flinch when it approaches. Occasionally, an image is disabled and it flutters wearily for the floor, where it lies twitching until it is re-enabled. The patient stands in the shadows, a balding, brown skinned presence, smiling to himself.

The raindrop hasn't yet fallen from the railing.

The terror of living I realize is not in the cohesion of a drop of rain poised dizzily on the railing but on the neuronal landscape at the threshold of our dreams. If we stop changing that, will the world too stop changing? I have neither slept nor dreamed in several days.

The raindrop on the railing has become quite large. The tension is increasing because of gravity. The drop of rainwater could now fall any moment yet I keep on watching it survive just that extra fraction of a nanosecond.