

VIVEK NARAYANAN

Mr. Subramanian

Mr. Subramanian's Data

Surprisingly he did not read the paper today.

He reads it normally without fail.

There were portable databases there that you could eat after you were done with them, going for practically free.

The newspaper's terrors are surely worse than ours.

The day is really drifting now.

I wonder if I could even have used that database, thinks he. "Well, I could have *been* that database," says his laptop to him, unusually eloquent. "Just that it's hard to *be*."

Mr. Subramanian Examines His Liking for the New and Plans His Own Obsolescence: Five Shapes for your Kind Consideration

The Ant

There is the fetish of the new and then
 there is the dream of the new:
if the sun glints through his bedroom pane
 each day glowing without fail
he cannot trust it yet for all that regular
 hokum—needs some kind of shakeup
does he, needs... to shuck off his human reservation,
 his dark ant shuffling with rice grain.

Things

No doubt there is the vice
of the new, some
kind of glandular
shakeup in every
restitutive fetish, some
screwed-up eros of
object hawking
its hokum yes but
nevertheless
irresistible— the arch of a
ladle reminds you of
her neck, so lickable! then
right after that an ordinary
headlamp glints, so widely
strokable! and you wink
back without hardly
thinking,
damn it!

The Ruse of the Blank Slate

There's something even deeper going
on here, by the by. Mr. Subramanian longed
for the idea of progress because he couldn't
stand what he was, never mind the hokum of
progress. In 1950, for instance, the manager
of the New Project to Shake Things Up and Rain
Marvels of Engineering on the Landscape to Herald
the New India was looking specifically for Brahmin
boys from the South to hire. Yep. So did the old habits
persist among the glinting new; people stuffed
their face and survived. He'd kill

for a blank slate, caress that lovely fetish.
But the body is not a blank slate.

One Day

That he might, one day, slough off this hokum of him, merge into the purity of form.
That in this emerging the world was still remaindered in the texture of its husk.
That, failing that, he might suddenly wake up in the midst of the shakeup, in the face of
its blinding face, just to call himself back up for a second, say hi.
That one day in a glint he might come to understand what it is he is almost
understanding now.
That one day we might dare again to judge between real aura and mere fetish: belief
being a value and not an event.
That that might be the start of something new.

On Getting Back to Basics

lunchtime, so what's new again is hunger
which you can really only fetishise for so long

the mind might glint but the limbs they groan
worthless becomes the hokum of the spoken

O what if art could shake up you up then
feed you till you were happy and spent

Digression in Receipt of Nourishment, Acknowledgement of the Body's Inbuilt Guilt

Dear sir, dear self, in acknowledgement of, in thanks and its other coinside, guilt, for:

humblest receipt of modern life,
neurotic redemption of cultural afterlife,
daily sambar its squelchy redemption
our thought parade—labour, imaginary production,
magic drone drone of the verbal,
magic deceit of referral

deceit of the distant memory of agriculture
and also perhaps in the concrete sense of the word production that suitor
whose emergence over centuries and subsequent disappearance
made work as evil then work as necessity work as transcendence
in food, food as work, production as receipt of culture, and finally magic
because of the lack of effort, the lack of magic.

Hmm, he declares. What a surprise! It is in fact chewable constant food and not culture that is the source of my guilt. That dark and unplaceable drone, which dogs me even in my settled bliss, is nothing less than the mind's receipt of the alimentary canal's relentless production: shit as shamanic.

On hearing this, Mrs. Subramaniam in her teasing voice says: cho tragic. And yet, she says, is this it, are we now in receipt of all the information, are you not merely being a typical old brahmboy, rehearsing and at best recasting food = karma equations? All I really hear in your guilty moan is the ascetic drone of several rather persistent arguments over the centuries of your so-called culture, cultural production advocating, in spite of its beehive drive, disengagement as a route to freedom!

Nor did the ancients or the moderns crack the guilt of eating in general, concurs he. The answer lies not in the invention of food or the production or the revival of magic. The answer (rubbing mournfully his belly, his liver, his mysterious insides) is here, right here, and it cannot speak, for all its even-now drone.

You are sad when you are hungry, she says, guilty when you are full. Or is it the other way around, my lovable drone, hungry *because* sad, full *because* guilty?

Resplendent food of my heart, he says, let me tell you that I am happiest in receipt of your salads. They are of conceptual interest in their sly conundrum of a kitchen's labour,

focusing, as they do, not quite on process but on the deceptive harmony of their elements. They are not guilt-free, but they do address guilt more directly in never fully concealing their sources. How cynically have our salads been engineered into metaphors for political culture; and yet they are the very morsels of culture! Let me celebrate for a second your last effort, that wedding of orange and avocado, let the future generations know that bliss exists!

I thank you dear, she says, but salad is not the answer.

Poem, with a Choice of Four Possible Endings

Drunk on his little bicycle,
not unlike little Nakulan drunk, in his time,
on *his* bicycle, searches Mr. S.
for sin: in this buttoned up bloody city, searching
not so much for the sake as for the larger cause,
that the tawdry may not have been entirely decimated
by some insecure fellow's prohibitory zeal, that sin
which must come
in all colours not only red but blue and yellow too perhaps
green most certainly violet—
sin, genuine sin, sin beyond
festooned purity, yes, that sin may come to redeem
our lives lived in deathly earnest danced around the taxman
and the pulmonary State, sin surviving the machinations of
terminally boring boors, not moral police so much
as goonda raj, goondas fulminating to inherit
the goondas of yore, oh, no, that we may do
it over, that is over do it, that we may go drunk
in the very street our souls dragging us by
the bit into new lands, that lit, like Montaigne,
saying one thing doing another,
drunk like the fulminating line that does
whatsoever it wants, whosoever it wants wher-
ever, flying festooning or sinking
with angry red decimal eyes, dumb
to critics, beyond fascination, beyond estimation,
clearing the air, fulminating against red
of anger and for the naked hungry red semen of sexual
desire, monsooned with the blood of flowers, marooned
on a traffic island, crooning like a dog to the skies—

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culminating in the drunk sun of day, rolling awake on the road,
for we shall disavow our decisions, our most daring jumps when asked,
for our courage shall fail us later but our work shall remain
to defend or not itself—

*

culminating not too soon as a kind of nothing-bliss
in the drunk degenerate illuminated bed, in the dread fight
against lumbering heavy shadows—

*

culminating where once we began, in that dark basement bar by the sea—
the television its single channel, the drunk men solo and utterly silent
working their solemn way down the glasses as if at prayer—
sin reduced to hiding in its cloak, imploding, self-obliterating—

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garlanded by the light of life itself.

Short Prayer to Sound

Sound has the particular quality of being visible. It is the greater god. Vision, in evening's fog, presents an old man on the cycle with his sacks of newspapers, the threaded cheese of his hair, even the holes of his eyes; yet, though riveting, vision knows nothing of his pain.

Sound does, for sound *is* pain, gathered and garbled in the agora, statistical and defeated in the agora, dim and thundering from its secret window. Never regular, though it may sometimes seem so. Never present, though it may seem. Rivet of moment to moment, a sack on the face with holes to see.

Imprecise, as a world seen through cheesecloth, ease of the friend that follows. Agony internal to the amphora. The tinier holes through which a certain quality refines. A sack, a private lack, riveted into some riveted face.

What does sound carry? It will not tell. It refuses to be known. So close to us, riveted, it will not tell. Mr. Subramanian wants to gather memories in its sack, as if memories, in the brain's shifting agora, had actually the tangible quality of being gatherable. Alas, sound is forgetting. It has already been forgotten. It is the hole into which all knowhow disappears. The hole we call: *the future*.

Yet, like peas in a pod, like arguments in the agora, it follows a track.

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