SHANTARAM

Gregory David Roberts

The first thing I noticed about Bombay, on that first day, was the smell of the different air. I could smell it before I saw or heard anything of India, even as I walked along the umbilical corridor that connected the plane to the airport. I was excited and delighted by it, in that first Bombay minute, escaped from prison and new to the wide world, but I didn't and couldn't recognize it. I know now that it's the sweet, sweating smell of hope, which is the opposite of hate; and it's the sour, stifled smell of greed, which is the opposite of love. It's the smell of gods, demons, empires, and civilizations in resurrection and decay. It's the blue skin-smell of the sea, no matter where you are in the Island City, and the blood-metal smell of machines. It smells of the stir and sleep and waste of sixty million animals, more than half of them humans and rats. It smells of heartbreak, and the struggle to live, and of the crucial failures and loves that produce our courage. It smells of ten thousand restaurants, five thousand temples, shrines, churches, and mosques, and of a hundred bazaars devoted exclusively to perfumes, spices, incense, and freshly cut flowers. Karla once called it the worst good smell in the world, and she was right, of course, in that way she had of being right about things. But whenever I return to Bombay, now, it's my first sense of the city-that smell, above all things-that welcomes me and tells me I've come home.

The next thing I noticed was the heat. I stood in airport queues, not five minutes from the conditioned air of the plane, and my clothes clung to sudden sweat. My heart thumped under the command of the new climate. Each breath was an angry little victory. I came to know that it never stops, the jungle sweat, because the heat that makes it, night and day, is a wet heat. The choking humidity makes amphibians of us all, in Bombay, breathing water in air; you learn to live with it, and you learn to like it, or you leave.

Then there were the people. Assamese, Jats, and Punjabis; people from Rajasthan, Bengal, and Tamil Nadu; from Pushkar, Cochin, and Konarak; warrior caste, Brahmin, and untouchable; Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Parsee, Jain, Animist; fair skin and dark, green eyes and golden brown and black; every different face and form of that extravagant variety, that incomparable beauty, India.