

CALDERWOOD

MAP OF THE CITY IN A
MIGRANT DREAM

ROHIT REVI

A dramatic landscape photograph of a large body of water, likely a bay or estuary, under a dark, stormy sky. The sky is filled with heavy, dark clouds, with a break of light on the horizon where the sun is setting or rising, casting a warm glow on the water and the clouds below. The foreground shows the silhouettes of buildings and trees, suggesting a coastal town or city. The overall mood is somber and atmospheric.

CALDERWOOD

MAP OF THE CITY IN A MIGRANT DREAM

Cover photo taken by self in Katarokwi.

Calderwood is a story of theft. It is a story of thieves – landlords, dacoits and *sahibs*, stone-settlers who patrol lands that do not belong to them, cursed with infinite suspicion, and armed at the borders with pens as mighty as their swords. It is also a story of many young people who cross borders to learn on this stolen land and soon, learn of its theft.

Calderwood is the name of a house located in Katarokwi. A house with four rooms and four times as many residents. Each year many young students from a land across oceans, Kerala, arrive here to learn at the college in the mornings, work their shifts in the evenings, find warmth in each other at nights, and then, rest for a few hours at Calderwood before daybreak. Though newer migrant students live there every few years or so, a dozen taxi cars permanently line the pavements leading into the house. You can't miss the place, but you must be careful walking in. There is a stone-settler slumlord in this neighbourhood, sleeping with his ears tuned to the sound of coins, and he is somewhat sticky to deal with.

Finally, Calderwood is written for many memories. Most recently, for the memory of Virender Singh Sandhu. Our names are often forgotten in this country because many of us do not exist beyond the years assigned to us on paper. But memories and dreams are unique in that they both live through remembrance.

For Virender.

PARTS

PART I

There is only one Sun..... 5

PART II

A Note on Death Kilometers Away from Home.....16

There is only one Sun

*“I don't know politics but I know the names
Of those in power, and can repeat them like
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru.
I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one.”*
Kamala Das, An Introduction

I.

This City knows many of its stories. Stories that honey-flow from tongues. Stories that wax-flow into ears. Some stories, they rest for a night or two in someone's flesh and set forth at the break of dawn. Every once in a while, one solitary story leaps forth from the Portsmouth Tavern and shimmers across Lake Ontario, riding waves, a little queasy and musical, much like the breath of alcohol that shaped it, and presumably, sinks deep soon after. Some stories of this City have been captured mid-flow, stolen from between tongues, and thrust upon pieces of limestone. The stone-city knows those ones especially well.

This story though, is not one that is known or remembered at all. The City never heard this one. That's probably only because it is the story of the City itself.

It starts with your Sun and ends with someone's death. There are a few characters and what could be called a minor plotline. The City doesn't know any of those people well, but they do know each other, and they know The City. That is something, I guess.

Alright then.

A hundred and fifty million kilometers away from wherever you are right now, there exists the Sun – only one. Its birth takes us back a few billion years, four and a half to be precise.

A cloud of gas and dust, a whirling dervish, collapsed under its own weight but thankfully did not have to explain itself to Management. At first, a few particles rushed to the scene, ostensibly to help, but instead, they stayed on to watch. That was a mistake. Soon enough, as though a fistfight had broken out in an Old Delhi street, an endlessly growing crowd of particles huddled around with great anticipation. Friends, families, neighbours. Once enough of them gathered, what was believed to be a fight revealed itself to be a street-play. The drums set the tune, the actors took to stage, and a dance commenced. Holding each other and swaying to the beats, circling like the dervish herself, incrementally growing into each other. Just as the play began, the onlookers suddenly found themselves with roles to play. Halay dancers, dervishes, the bhangra troupe, cotton-candy vendors, whack-a-mole stalls, craft-brewers, mimicry-artists, elephants, the people who could write your name and all your secrets into a single grain of rice, magicians, the halwa stalls (kozhikodan), storytellers, toy-sellers, and among them, one astrologer and her green parakeet. She stands hidden somewhere deep in the crowd right now, chewing tobacco, the bird perched on her shoulders, calmly watching the dance unfold around her. Her foot taps occasionally to a rhythm, but that's all for now. When she is pleased, she will make her way through the crowd and towards the center, carefully brushing past the madness but without any real sense of urgency.

At the very heart now. She will sit down, legs folded. Her parakeet still perched firm. Around them, an intoxicated dance never to be seen again rages on, spreading wider and wider with every touch. She will shuffle her cards and deal them out face-down, all twenty-seven now floating side-by-side in pure space. The beautiful rose-ringed parakeet, so called for a rose-coloured ring around its bright green neck, will spread its wings for a moment and land on her lap, and from there, onto the cards. It will take a moment to survey the play still unravelling on all sides, and then shift all attention back onto the spread. It will walk upon the cards, from end to end and back, leaving not much of a mark behind. A few back-and-forths later, it will stop suddenly with full conviction, and so will the dance. Its rose-ringed neck will arch down. The beaks will open a centimeter or so, the eyes will focus themselves on one solitary card. It will not hear the drums anymore, nor would it see the dancers drenched in sweat. The drums recede into a tense silence. The bird's neck will arch further down, the wings will spread a little, and a card will be chosen. With a quick motion, it will lift the card, and along with it, its own self. The

parakeet takes flight now soaring above the astrologer and the dancers, circling a few hundred times. Beneath its wings the dancers now begin to collapse onto each other. A climax. They sing a chorus that could be heard across Old Delhi, echoing back unto them from the walls of the Jama Masjid. A new dust rises and swallows all.

When the dust finally settles a few days from now, all that will remain is a beautiful star – the Sun, crafted by everything and everyone who danced that evening - their songs, dances, magic tricks, and their *halwa*. A hot, glowing sphere that stands alone, lovingly holding all things around it close. Among the things, there will be a planet the colour of a parakeet.

II.

On this planet, a few hundred years ago, a city was built with stone in the name of a King. It was built on lands stolen by thieves. It was, like we have come to know so often, built by terror and violence. Houses were raised, prisons were fortified, and streets were paved with interlocking stones that made the flesh beneath stop breathing. With time, most of those streets would lead either to a prison or to a house. The ones that didn't lead to either waited patiently for a destination, sometimes for years. Purposeless streets that led nowhere. Houses that walled-out, prisons that walled-in. In houses, the thieves. In prisons, the stolen.

The thieves loved their loot deeply, with all its stolen lake, lumber, labour and life, and so they stole its story too. Unlike most stories though, theirs does not remember where they came from or why – it begins with the City and is likely to end there too. As for how they got there, the people told numerous different stories – all conflicting, all imagined to be true but all equally wrong, much like the people in Hao Jingfang's *Pimaceh*.

These stories offer a sense of grandeur, profess an achievement of some kind, and were meant to instill a sense of pride in them.

Some believe they braved icy winds and fought lake-monsters to settle here, and so they consider themselves dutybound to remain vigilant, lest the vile monsters break water again.

Some remember walking through a forest of fire and brimstone and being rewarded with a divine right to lay claim to a city now resistant to fire.

Some stories remember a founder, a tall man, an aide to the King, who brought with himself an army of brave men who slashed the trees, drilled the earth, casted demons of the land into prisons, burned everything else, and upon the embers, created a home for his worthy children.

Some remember a woman, translucent, so pure her feet barely touched the ground, whose kindness befriended the birds and pacified the wolves that inhabited these lands, and whose patience readied the city for a civilized life.

Needless to say, these are all wrong, and might I add, terribly unimaginative.

Truth is that they could never come to terms with the crimes that fuel their very lungs. Every step they took in the city vibrated in them with a memory of truth and filled their bodies with fear – of retribution and eventual justice. They were, after all, eternally doomed to sleep in the mainour of their theft.

And so, these shallow fables were weaved, stories designed to invoke forgetfulness more than remembrance, stories that awkwardly reminisce heroism, tragedy, courage, glory, or some other literary trope. Yet, despite the best of narrations, when the Sun shines upon these bodies, their shadows still cast a burning shade of crimson red.

III.

I couldn't care less about those stories. They are petty, excessive, and tragically predictable. But I will briefly narrate what followed. Now that is a story this City pretends to not have heard yet.

Their pathic love for their ill-gotten City gradually begins to consume them in entirety. With each passing year, many of them start resembling the City themselves, in their appearances, in their movements and in their dreams.

At first, no one noticed this. It began with the veins in their bodies turning grey, but not yet grey enough to stand out against their pale skins. It did cause a minor irritation initially but that was largely ignored. A year later, on a summer morning, they woke up to see that their fingernails had stopped growing altogether. Dirt underneath those nails now glued to their skins permanently, as if it had always been there. They noticed their flesh growing hard, wrapped by a hide that was toughening each day, greyer by the hour. The texture of their skins felt no different from that of the walls they built. Rough and lifeless. Sealed under the lips, the tongues soon developed a permanent coat of white stone-dust, capable only of producing tasteless words. Nothing they drank seemed to wash it down.

But the first truly alarming moment occurred when they began to shed eyelashes. To lose something, however minor, filled them with great anxiety. Some picked the fallen lashes from the streets and made their living selling them to the wealthy. A few – maddened by what had become of them, walked further and further into Lake Ontario hoping that the waters would bring back some life, some softness, some moisture, some joy, but they found themselves sinking under their own weight.

They felt abandoned by gods, and for the first time, they were right.

Most thieves moved beyond the fall of eyelashes, and grew to feel proud of what they had become. Now they looked more like each other, spoke the same stone-dusted tongue and seemed to mirror each other in every way. Perhaps now they wouldn't need to peddle stories anymore. They were one with the City in a way that no one else was. For them, their right to the city was now sealed in their bones, on their tongues and in their eyes. They knew each other as *stone-settlers* and proclaimed each other so. Masters of stone-city – stone-police, stone-lords, and stone-patrollers. The incomparable sahibs of a city whose history they knew to be themselves.

Nevertheless, as is the case across the world, the misery of a lie only deepens with each iteration. The blood that flowed through their veins had become more viscous, less fluid. It crawled through the body, reluctant to inch forward. They could no longer live or laugh without fear. The sense of vanity gave way to a sense of loss that pervaded their entire being, but no one could be

certain of what. A cold intimacy festered their friendships and greetings became acknowledgements.

At nights, their dreams were clouded with a melting fog of stone-dust, with images of life that every escaped into the fog with every step they took. In every dreaming moment, they chased images that haunted them from between wisps of stone-dust. Specific images. Fluttering visions of dancers, drummers, dervishes. The dust occasionally takes a pinkish hue of cotton-candy, but sharply turns lifeless again. A crowd breaks into applause at a far distance for an invisible mimicry-artist whose joke they will never hear. They see the shadow of an elephant spraying water upon a laughing child. The smell of freshly prepared kozhikodan halwa constantly wafts behind the fog, out of their reach. At an unreachable far-end of the stone-dust fog, they began to suspect the presence of a secret that will always be denied to them.

This week, in the final act, their delirious madness slipped over from the confines of their dreams into their waking hours permanently. An endless, impenetrable fog of stone-dust descended upon the city from end to end. There was surely love, laughter, dance, music and colour alive somewhere in this world, but it always flickered beyond them, perpetually elusive, and to be lived by people they could only see as ever-fleeting shadows.

For the stone-settlers, there was no longer a semblance of a life in their world, only a set of broken relations, cheerless entertainment, cold intimacies, and dreadful work.

Today morning, as the fog grew thicker, they lost the Sun.

What is this curse, and what did we do to deserve it?

No one answered, but they all knew the reason why. The sound of a Green Parakeet emerging from a far-end of the fog only confirmed it.

IV.

Many years since, and only about two years ago, five young people of dark brown skin and deep black hair, took a 26 hour-long connection flight from Kochi to stone-city, via New Delhi and Kiev, the cheapest of options.

None of them knew each other, at least not yet. They will, in time, share a home.

Calderwood.

Onboard, hurtling across skies that belonged to nations, they sat apart, each one slightly annoyed by a lack of what they would later call ‘leg-room’, and whenever possible, each one dreaming, in a language familiar to Kamala Das, the poet who spoke in three, wrote in two and dreamed in one.

Onboard, only one of them silently wondered whether it would be impolite to ask for a refill of their chosen alcoholic beverage.

And so it goes that they moved towards stone-city, with stainless steel tumblers and a strainer for tea leaves, some textbooks, note-books and some stationery, a significant amount of money owed to banks and money-lenders, a few terribly inadequate winter-clothes, some medicines – mainly for the stomach, a cheap travel adaptor and one laptop known for its dubious charge retention capacity, a photo or two of a preferred deity or a copy of a Holy Book, various spices carefully packed and labelled by an anxious parent, and perhaps most importantly, one small pressure-cooker each (with a spare rubber gasket thrown in, just as a backup).

A grand survival kit for an unknown land.

Hours later, as pilots made landing preparations, the airplane marked its descent into a deep shroud of stone-fog, rattling under thousands of small pieces of debris. Though unexpected, it seemed to appear normal to everyone else onboard, so it felt normal to the five of them too. Normal is the right feeling. They began to mirror actions, a habit that will take weeks to lose. No

one knew what to expect and so, anything and everything was to be expected. Questions can be reserved for later.

Two among them wondered whether turmeric powder needed to be marked as a ‘food product’ on the customs checklist. One of them misplaced their earphones. From time to time, all of them studied their passports, visas, boarding passes, bank statements, admission letters and proofs of authenticity of arbitrary things. A folder filled with papers designed to validate each other and justify themselves.

For some people, papers must announce truths, for their tongues are born unworthy.

As they neared the eventual destination, all five developed an unconscious habit of feeling for their purses and wallets with ever increasing frequency. At the border they will be clutching it tight. Two among them started crafting clever answers in their heads to hypothetical questions from the stone-patrollers to be expected at the border. A few chests pounded as the uncertainties of their hearts wrestled with the uncertainties of their papers. Rib-bones shivered, but that’s probably the cold. Their path to learning was laden with many fears, anxieties, and uncertainties.

When they arrived, the long and winding hallways of the border-zone were lit with hundreds of unnecessary lights, lights which only seemed to make the fog worse. They made their way through the hallway carefully, as if this was their first college test. They all silently wondered if the ungodly opacity around them was normal too, but they were all reassured by each other’s silences. The walls, the floor, the fog. Disconcerting, but must be normal.

At the far end of the room, three stone-walled cabins with a single brick removed on one side each. The ones courageous enough to peek through caught glimpse of the incredible sight. Stone-patrollers. Large, lifeless administrators of their future, pale eyes moving slowly, surveying papers, gripping tight a stone-pen dripping with venom. At the tip of that pen, generations of sweat from across oceans. One among the five almost succumbed to a nameless emotion at the sight of the pen. The masters conquerors of lake monsters, the warriors who captured fire with their bare hands, the kind ones who pacified wolves and the brave that cast demons into prisons.

The stories had travelled across oceans. The hope of the world. Their hope.

One after the other, each of the five approached the counter, holding up a divine piece of paper waiting to be inked. The paper they held was to be marked by their destiny, their permission to learn amongst, work for and serve the stone-city. Until otherwise decided. No decision is permanent, and every commitment is temporary. It is what you do with it that matters.

V.

What follows is a brief destiny of the Five.

One and Two were inked and let in through the large doors beyond the cabins. The stone-patroller mentions that One is lucky to be here. Two was let known that they will be under watch. Both were equally relieved to hear those words. They will now inhabit Calderwood for three years. They will both drive taxis, do odd jobs, and spend what they earn frugally. They will smile often and hold the city close. They will know not to wander too deep into the fog and will be no more curious than asked to be. They will purse their lips and lower their eyes. A few years from now, they will both come to be recognized by many, though not by all, as stone-settlers.

Three was denied entry. The patroller gave no reason, and Three did not have time to ask. On the flight back, they will find their mouth dry, eyes moist and the only emotion they feel for months will be an inexplicable guilt.

Four was inked and let in without any comments. They will now move to Calderwood and join One and Two. They will work cash registers and some more part-time, and like One and Two, spend what they earn frugally. They complained often, wandered deep, looked beneath stones and searched for fish in the waters. They will soon start to feel sick at the sight of pale grey buildings and the stories of the city. They will wonder why there are prisons so old. In a year, they will start to find themselves slipping between the veils of stone-dust, passing between cracks in the layers of fog. Streams of sunlight will creep between their cracks occasionally. Only for them. One day soon they will find the Sun beyond stone-dust fog. They will join a world of dancers, magicians, halwa-makers, elephants, and the rest.

Five too was inked and let in without any comments. They are the last to join the others at Calderwood but will be the first to leave.

Five holds a world in their eyes. They had always worked many jobs at the same time, so stone-city would feel no different to them. They will learn with hunger, work with dignity and dream in that one language. They are quiet and confident, shy and resolute. Soon, they will gather the world in their eyes around them - friends, neighbours, colleagues. Stories, secrets, jokes. They will have everything, and all they will need in the world will be some more ink.

They will ask. They will be denied.

They will make calls, ask for help, beg for mercy and forget to sleep. They will receive honest words of helplessness from good people. They will leave no door unknocked, no stone unturned, and gradually, as if living inside a cursed hour-glass, they will run short of money.

For a week, they will confine themselves to Calderwood. They will call in sick, tired and ailing. They will be alive, but only within the walls of a house. They will have died on the lands in which that house stood.

They will talk, as if only to the walls. And then they will stop talking.

Their last viewing will be watched by a family beyond oceans on a screen.

Inside Calderwood, the Five were equals with divergent futures.
Outside, they weren't much.

Part II

A Note on Death Kilometers Away from Home

My comrade, another *foreign student*, once asked me, “Death is scary anywhere. But why is it so frightening here?”

We thought about it together for a while.

Is it your distance from home, and the anticipation of a heavy burden that will befall on your newly made friends? Or is it the sheer Kafkaesque bureaucracy that we the undead can only imagine currently? Certifications, investigations, assertions and permits... Who should my corpse be getting in touch with for all these? Service Canada or the International Center at the University? Neither are particularly useful – they’ll probably ask me to refer to a webpage that hasn’t been updated for years. I’ll probably die a second time before I get anything out of them.

Will they transport my body home? Will I be packed into a suitcase and shoved into a bus heading to Toronto Pearson Airport? Will I need to show a purpose of travel at the border?

The Bus is the best option. Probably a rideshare could work too, but this is too much for a dead man to be leaving to chance.

Who will pay for all the business-as-usual? I heard it costs a few lakh rupees to get all the papers in order and get me swinging across oceans. Our parents cannot afford that for sure. Is there an educational death loan that I could swear to pay out in installments? Unlikely.

I know that migrant student chat-groups will light up with notifications of fear, love and empathy. But sadly, everyone will be helpless, as I myself felt twice last year. Some Iranian student in British Columbia will lose their sleep trying to find a way to help me reach my family. Messages will be relayed and forwarded across cellphone towers - with urgency, with imminence, with care. But Canada will not listen. The ears of this country turned into stone decades ago.

In Canada, this damningly stone-cold country, I will probably be buried in a standard Judaeo-Christian way, in what I can only imagine to be a block of ice. My only hope is that it turns out to be some naturally cryogenic body preserving machine-thing, and I'll wake up years later on Turtle Island and find people with warmth in their hearts and life in their smiles.

When India was a colony, how did they get the dead *Sahibs* back to Britain? I'm pretty sure some ceremonial horses and a few handkerchiefs were involved. At least that's how I imagine it. Long processions of disciplined horses carrying a Sahib each onto large ships, and brown people waiting at the docks waving handkerchiefs for some godforsaken reason. I'm not a history major, but it feels right.

If I die in Canada, I'm worried my parents will never get to say goodbye. My comrades here will die a few hundred times just trying to grant me a dignified departure. They all have dissertations to write and timelines to worry about.

Canada is definitely not a country to die in.