

Extract  
Blackland  
by  
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Chapter1, Indu: On the roof

The faint heavenly light of dawn edged over her, delivering her from the anaesthesia of sleep. Doggedly dreaming, she stood on a beach at land's end barely conscious of the waters of three seas fumbling gently for her feet. Discrete hues of light, dark blue and teal flowed in three directions defying nature's fusing forces. She was conscious of these daylight details even though it was night in the vision and the southern constellations formed a canopy over her, far above the land. The city was months behind her to the north where some of these asterisms had hugged the horizons of her metropolis. And other stellar masses had careened into the line separating sky and jagged cityscape, disappearing from view \_ till she discovered them anew in the skies of this strange world. They scaled this unspoiled southern sky, poised, horizon-huggers no more. She stood there hushed, a little agape and a little disoriented, because her stars had shifted ever so slightly from their old stubborn signposts over the beloved city. Bits of never-before-seen sky and the occasional shooting star inspired a crick in her neck as she kept gazing skywards, persisting with eternity, waiting for more celestial novelties.

Night scurries up to the roof produced some of Indu's most vivid dreams. A scholar had once told her: "On the ground, in the city, your view is incomplete: there are alleys, roads and shrinking expanses. But up high, there is infinity \_ the panacea for fear of any kind. The first gods lived in the sky, not on the ground with

us. Your city was founded in memory of those old infinite gods that resided in the sky and the trees. Our itinerant ancestors who were their devotees had hugged the beaches. Before dawn, they would track scurrying crabs and baby turtles into the sea, riding out with the tides on their tree rafts to give prayers to the life-giving fish that nourished them. Reef divers combed the murky bottoms of ocean shelves running their naked fingers perilously over spiny starfish and sea urchins, and gradually they worked out a mythic lore. As their meals crackled on fires lit in the sand, the story-makers told of how the hoary fish that glinted past their boats had gone on to clamber up the horizon to become the stars that glittered across their worlds. When their lights died out, they fell back into the ocean as osteal starfish.

As the people moved away from vast water-bodies and their arenose coasts, they sought familiarity in inland waters, lakes, potamic and palustrian landscapes and up above in the sea of the universe. Their nascent consciousness of culture was still tied up with the plenty, fury and floods of ancient water worlds. The stars that guided them onwards were the first gods and to them they were still fish-like helping them on their landward quests, as the river dolphin Bhulan's sea cousins had in times of water, now remembered only in maternal stories recounted by hearthside. The gods swam round and round, fish-like unable to break free from the dark ropes of the great north star, the pillar and architrave that rose from the ground and held the sky in place. It was a tree, and it was also a portal. Like the seashore, it connected their land to the ocean and sky \_ the tree and the fish \_ the new earth realm and the old water world. To their amazement, during an initial dread-filled foray into an unspoiled forest, the itinerant ancestors found a crab living high in a rainwater pool, up in the cavernous branches of a tall tree, whose crown reached out to the clouds. For their beachcombing parents, this crab had been a precious symbol

of union, as it lived in the ocean and it could also crawl up on land. In the crab, therefore, the people had found a portal to the united realms of land, ocean and sky.

A new story was told as they trekked through virgin forest fighting their suppurating wounds in search of open water. An ancient crustacean had clambered with the fish up the horizon reached the centre of the sky carrying the seed of a sacred fig not quite Banyan, not quite Pipal, not quite man, not quite woman. The seed gripped the sky through the claws of the crab. As the world settled into its diurnal rhythms, its roots grew out into the world clawing outwards from its testa, mimicking its entombed parent crustacean. It became the totem pole of the northern sky, a god \_ the north star \_ only five wandering star-fish ever managed to break free from its wind roots.”

Balancing gingerly on roof timbers plastered over with brick powder and lime, the roost offered Indu a view of not just the boulevard below. She came to the roof to discover her city. Indu could see that the masons and stone workers across the neighbourhood had quit for the night. The metallic clang of bronze chisels and hammers were the signature sounds of the city by day. Her house too had been worked over by them. Renovated every generation by each new family and era, it had risen ever higher, separated by metres of earth and epochal brick from the city’s foundational platforms, interned now in a phreatic underworld. Some of the underground rooms of the previous level had been retained as basements where householders cured heaps of dung wrapped in straw and scented herbal roots in massive sweet-smelling storage jars. In a year’s time, the dung would break down into crumbly earthworm fare, ready for the fields of Blackland. Other rooms were converted into sepulchres, closed off to enclose the bones of family members. Occupying families had interred the victims of battles fought in an older incarnation

of the great city before the founders disbanded the first pantheon of gods and restored internecine peace.

An underground room in Indu's house held an urn that contained a few bones from her great grandfather's fractional burial in the sacred grove. After exposure to the elements, the ornis and animals, the family and its priests had returned to collect a bone fragment from the remains for internment at the house, while the rest was buried and a sapling planted on the spot. Priests came with the appropriate chants to ensure that great grandfather's spirit would give life to the sacred grove's newest seedling. Years later when its green stem had hardened into bark, his descendants would carve their clan totem on the wood, in this case the protective eyes of the elephant god, son of goddess. Her great grandmother had ordered brick from the flaring kilns of Blackland to have a platform erected around the tree where sages could sit in shade and read blessings to the late husband from palm-leaf hymnals. Trees representing famous individuals, especially founders, buried in the grove became pilgrimage spots for the townspeople. The dead were beamed into a new form of being. The city people were active participants in the reincarnation of their ancestors. Each tree was a forefather or matriarch. Ancestor forests surrounded Blackland. Over hundreds of years, after new clans and tribes had immigrated to the city, old totems had worn away and legends of the first tribes relegated to misplaced palm records, citizens could no longer recollect who was buried beneath which tree. They simply worshipped the grove instead. Part of their nuptials required Indu's father and mother to circumambulate a strangler fig. It had landed on a wild sugar palm in the palmery and after decades the tree became a sacred chimera bearing both palm fronds and fig leaves.

Indu and her cousins would wander into the crypts of their house seeking

the ghosts of the ancient people, having heard of the dead interred far beneath. They found the joints where masons had opilated the entrance to the old rooms. Pressing their ears up against the exposed brick, they listened for echoes from the underworld. She believed the spaces beyond beckoned to her, or at least she believed her cousins when they insisted that voices from the yonder had singled her out, calling for her in mournful whispers. She questioned her father the town preacher about the people who had lived in the old house underneath theirs. He looked troubled when he said, “there was a great flood followed by a fire set by the hands of men and many people died. Legends say the city had been unliveable for many months”. “Can it happen again, father?” she had asked. She wondered if one day her house too would become the foundation for a new era in the city. She kept this question to herself.

Their new-old house sat atop a lane that branched into the north-south thoroughfare. The city’s life pulsed along this arterial highway as it guided citizens and voyagers to workshops, homes, dance theatres and on epic voyages beyond the cities. Carried into the cities on the chaffy breeze, fading echoes of harvest songs brought Indu and her cousins scrambling to the roof at harvest time. They slit their eyes against the springtime, north bound sun to get a bird’s eye view of a pastoralist procession descending upon the great cities of what the foreigners liked to call Blackland. Indu was mesmerised. The contrasts produced by their peculiar costume and elaborately folded stiff headdresses were vaguely reminiscent of Blackland’s own gaudy fashions. After the arduous expedition, she imagined they washed by the river and changed into their best clothes before boarding the ferry of the one-handed boatman. The herders and their animals made a spectacular entrance at the city’s painted welcome gate. In a good year, Blackland’s fields of gargantuan

haystacks were the blonde beacons that called them in to their straw banquet. They timed their trek with the start of the golden season during the festival of thanksgiving for Lord Kokopelli, who had watched over the fertility of the land. The crop harvested, dried, and threshed, the city was awash in a bounty of sunshine and straw.

Bleating ruminants and an ensuing shower of manure clogged up all the roads into the metropolis, while the herders stopped at stalls for ale and famous pudding \_ blessed reprieve from a monotonous peripatetic diet of preserved meat. The shepherds also made their yearly visits to the city's workshops and nodal marketplaces, set up to serve the constant traffic of voyagers. If they arrived early, they could observe the entrance of palmery workers at their workshop in the city. The early-bird travellers were impatient to imbibe from the immaculately scrubbed pots of fresh palm sap hauled in towards dawn. Several hours later, they would have to settle for cups of fermenting toddy with accompaniments of chickpea-flour rolls. The dough was a mixture of chickpea flour, daubs of palm liquor, and yoghurt, which was cooked, flattened out on a cold shining copper plate, and sprinkled with crushed black sugar. These slender pancakes were carefully rolled into sweetcakes that startled tongues tranquilised by the sensory purity of scrubby mountain paths. It was merely a taste of what lay ahead in the bazaar.