

EYEBLINK CHOICES

I made Rai, a photographer, the narrator of a novel once, and some of what he says about his art in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* may be relevant here. 'A photograph is a moral decision taken in one eighth of a second, or one sixteenth, or one one-hundred-and-twenty-eighth.' 'Halfway between voyeur and witness ... that's where I've made my life, making my eyeblink choices.' 'I always liked to stick my face up against the hot sweaty broken surface of what was being done, with my eyes open, drinking, and the rest of my senses switched off.'

The metropolis is a horn of plenty, inexhaustible, excessive, impossible to grasp in full. To photograph it over the metamorphic decades, while it transforms itself from one city to another, Bombay into Mumbai, is to make those instant decisions, both moral and artistic, every day. The city's perpetual motion must be frozen into significant stillnesses, its flood of event crystallized into a few shining drops. The choices the photographer makes reveal the photographer as well as the subject. A portrait of a city—this portrait of this city—becomes a self-portrait too.

I first began to write about this city at approximately the same time that the earliest photographs here were taken. Back then I was thinking of childhood, of my own Bombay childhood and the many childhoods around me, rich and poor, Hindu, Muslim, Parsi and Christian, and so I'm struck by how powerfully, how intimately these images look at children, how the innocence of dance and play is suddenly complicated by the

arrival of a very real-looking toy gun, and while the boy at whom the gun is pointed is laughing—perhaps a little too uproariously for comfort—the boy holding the gun doesn't seem to think it's funny at all. The children of Bombay-into-Mumbai, ragged, cigarette-smoking, hustling on the street, stare out of these photographs, with too much knowledge in their eyes. Sooni Taraporevala has been showing us these children ever since *Salaam Bombay!*.

The old are here too, some from Sooni's own Parsi community, which she lovingly portrayed in an earlier book, and some from beyond it: bony aunties stretched out on daybeds, a letter-writer typing another man's message, a greybeard sitting in the shadow of an aircraft in which he will never fly, and M.F. Husain, still at home in the city from which he would later be exiled. One day perhaps, those children will grow up to be men and women like these.

As an old Bombayite/Mumbaikar, my memories were inevitably stimulated by images of some familiar places and people, for the glamour of the night city and the frisson of film-world celebrity, for everyday moments at Chowpatty and once-a-year occasions like Ganpati; but nostalgia has no place in an appreciation of this work. This is the city as one sharp eye has seen it, and I'm happy to have had Sooni's eye as my guide.

Salman Rushdie