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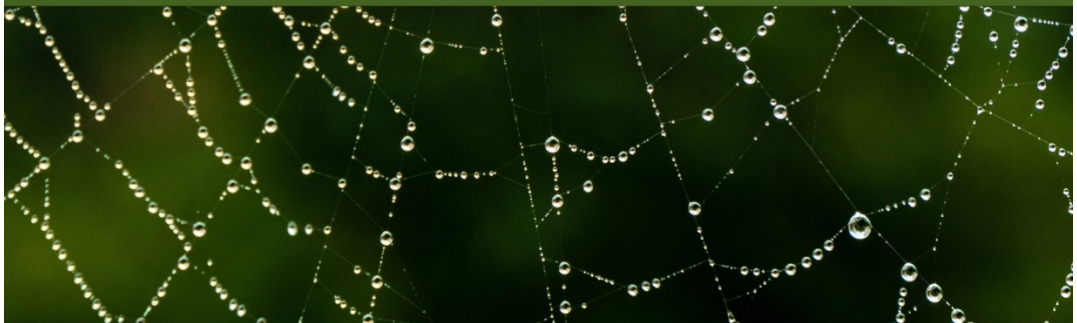
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Theme: Navigating Ecofear through Diverse Cultures



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From Dust to Dust...

Sarveswaran, Vidya

I am just beginning to hear the murmurs of a dusty morning. I drag my creamy white chair, a little bit off to one side so I can get a better view of the sun dappled skies from my balcony. This has become my lockdown morning ritual. The serene face of the Buddha painted on the coffee mug, comes alive as I filled it with fresh coffee. Seeing his face is meditation enough for me. I know I need the borrowed calmness to get me through the rest of the day.

Summers in this desert village are the days of heat, dust and nothing. Living on an academic campus, of about eight hundred odd acres, thirty kilometers away from civilization, teaches you to be both pliable and resilient, especially to dust. I dread the dust here. I am allergic to it. But, the dust here is singular. Both Aeolian and fugitive as environmentalists would say. But I think it is like poetry. Layered and metaphorical. First a thin smooth base like caramel swirls on cappuccino, followed by a second topping of shiny granular gravel. You got to get both right if you need to crack it. Dust is like a palimpsest in my house. I sweep, swab, wipe and mop, but the desert insists on bringing it back with a vengeance. Dust in this desert is my karmic pattern. I write, rewrite every story on it without a cut, edit, copy or paste! Today will be another new story, a dark tale, as I can see. The horizon before me threatens a burnt orange—orange and red horizons are most appropriate for Elizabethan theatre, not for the Thar Desert. That simply means, that there is a dust storm that will drop by to disrupt my life, a short while from now. The lukewarm coffee tells me that much time has gone by. That soon, last evening's Lysol sterile mopped, larger than life house, will be raped by apocalyptic dust makes me angry and helpless.

Teaching, Webinars, Research, chores, cooking, coordinating lives of loved ones in another city, and the lack of domestic help of any sort has made most life vulnerable in these surreal times. My inner Buddha tells me, I am a wee bit spoilt. Perhaps, I am. I desperately need a normal—not a *new normal*. I have begun to secretly detest the word. I know I do not have any more physical and mental energies for more dusty encounters. The perfectly arched berms—that surround the campus are the first line of defense against the dust storms. I can see them from my balcony. Town planners, architects and civil engineers call them an architectural marvel. Built from indigenous stone, the berms on campus are one of its kind in the country. The berms are a dramatic spectacle

to witness. Much like the Nazi architecture of intimidation, they are fortified and timeless as they seem. But the dust transcends the berms, space and time, and ends up perfectly in every unsuspecting ledge and nook in my house. As for the berms, they are easily smothered by the relentless dust. Dust plays an Othello on them. The masks that the dust wears is violent and sudden. I am shaken.

“I am terrified of the sneeze. Is it a dust sneeze or a covid sneeze?”

The lack of raucous humans has made the campus naked and stark. The air hangs dense with peace and silence in the mornings. Suddenly, there is a chirpy but boisterous break to my dusty thoughts. Brown, speckled house sparrows land on my wall and cling to the bricks. I have never seen so many clingers—cliff hangers; all my eight years on this campus. They hover around in little circles, suddenly cuddle up together and in an instant earth-dive, off the wall. My Instagram instinct tells me, I have no time for a DSLR. I quickly get them on my phone. Looking at the shot, I see the uncanny resemblance they bear to dust. They are grubby, brown and plain, like fleeting dust bunnies. Little feathered children of dust, their simplicity moves me. House sparrows have become my shamans during the lockdown. They mediate between my earth and their heavens. There are eight of them, I notice. An angel number as they say. Every morning these days, I need no phone alarms to wake me up. These dust babies have become my avian-circadian rhythm keepers. Belligerent sparrow chirrups, have replaced my Night Flute ringtones. And I don't seem to mind their intrusive conversations. I see them feelingly. In fact, sparrows and dust have become my entangled karmas. Every sneeze from the dust sends me running to smell coffee seeds. Coffee seeds are olfactory neutralizers. I am terrified of the sneeze. Is it a dust sneeze or a covid sneeze? I am desperate for smell. The desert offers no smells unlike the oceans. The sneeze has transmogrified into a desert landscape where one can die without a trace. Layered, dust storm deaths. *Loos* as the locals respectfully address the dust storms—more out of fear than of reverence. With magnificent sunsets and Van Gogh night skies, the desert is a silent killer and can bury anyone with all of its layered footprints in the endless dunes of dust and time.

My coffee is completely cold now. I have no time for another cup. I leave my chair to go in, and now I know that *I got to go from dust to dust*. I still look forward to the Dharma—an elixir in the Desert. Because petrichor in the desert still smells like hope. -The End

