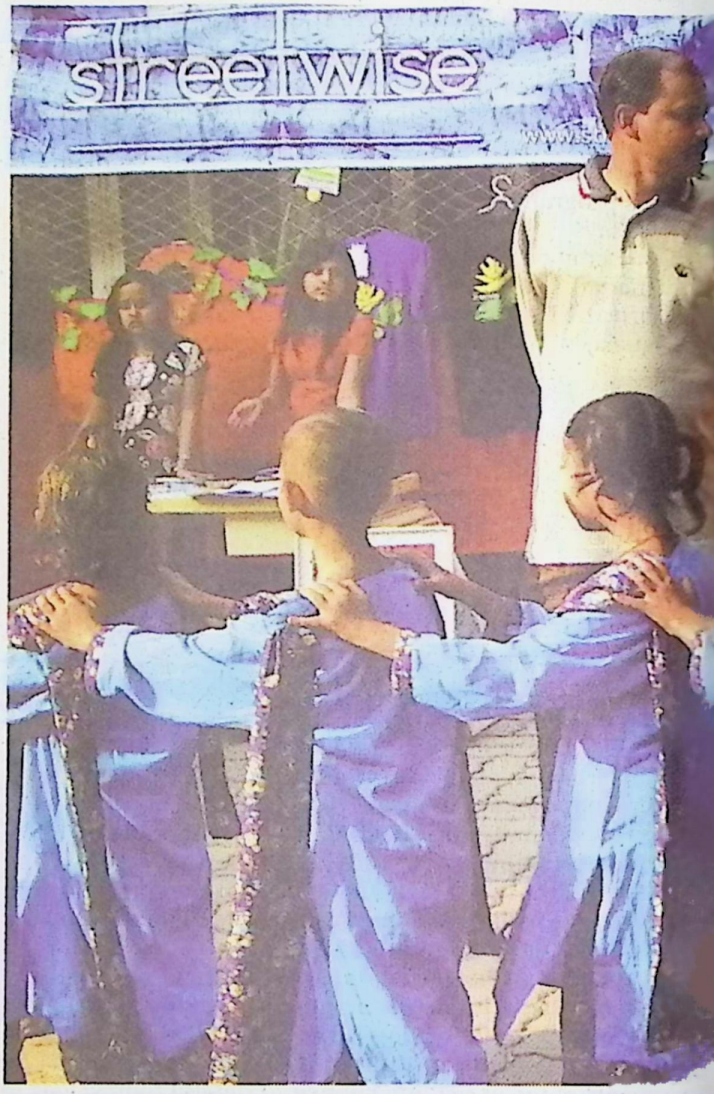
Writing the Wrong

A Day in School when Class was out



SHARBARI AHMED

This will be a tentative, perhaps even, timid piece. You see, this is my first column since arriving in Dhaka. I shall be here for seven months and suddenly feel that I have to be, horror of horrors, tactful when writing about my perceptions. I still feel very much like an interloper and possibly will until June when I leave. However, I have been here for ten days and already have things I need to get off my chest naturally, though I shall do so as gently as my instincts will permit. (This is when I hope my fan base which consists of my parents, an uncle and three pals in Darien, CT will be aghast and beg me not to censor myself).

A day after I arrived one of my closest friends, who happens to be the executive director of Streetwise, an organisation dedicated to providing Dhaka street children with hot meals, clothing and access to educational resources, invited me to a fair at the Australian International School. It was my first introduction to the politics of philanthropy in this country and a glimpse of how (certain members) of the upper class respond to the progeny of the pungent proletariat being thrust in their faces. It was, as a result, an emotionally complex afternoon.

The children, for whom Aparna Muyeed, the director of Streetwise, had provided bright uniforms, entered the school courtyard smiling, and giggling with excitement. They held on to one another's shoulders and looked around, wide-eyed and curious. We were greeted by the principal of the school, who was harried and kindly. A DJ was blasting the latest hip-hop meets incoherent nonsense stuff that preteens and teens from the West Bank to the Upper West Side love--my God, I am aging, but whatever happened to actual music? And let me just add, my generation listened to Dr. Dre, give me the Chronic any day over this palaver, but the point is that the Streetwise kids started dancing. After some gentle urging from Aparna they marched into the middle of the small courtyard and started shimmying and jumping. They were uninhibited in the way children are supposed to be, oblivious to the stares and in some cases, visible, discomfiture and bewilderment of some of the students and parents. I must mention, however, that it was a parent who approached Aparna and suggested she bring the Streetwise kids to the fair and initiated the entire thing.

After they danced for a bit the children were encouraged to look around the fair. For the most part the students at the school, save for a handful of incredibly active and involved kids one of whom will be voted most likely to succeed by her classmates seemed to ignore the Streetwise children. The children were let loose and most made a beeline for the soda table, where they fuelled up on coca cola. Aparna and I watched as they proceeded to get hopped up on caffeine and squeal with delight and run around looking at everything at the fair. There was a