

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/4

James Brodows
Indian Wedding

I.

Raise the armrests high! I shall slumber in the sky, London to Delhi.
Three empty seats on my left, nobody moving but the flight crew.
And that Sikh guy, in a red turban and white linen suit, strolling to my row:
“Very good, two for you, two for me,” he said, and sat at the other end.
I slept in my chair. After takeoff he removed the headrest, curled in two seats, then stretched over three, white hair atop my armrest at 37,000 feet.
He got drunk on whiskey sodas, invited me to the Golden Temple at Amritsar, danced, hit on flight attendants, and held babies.
I was happy he didn’t appear at baggage claim.

II.

Helena with the magic laugh shouted from a crowd of Indians holding signs and staring.
She had arrived two days earlier with her sister, we would travel together before the wedding.
We reached the Delhi guesthouse past midnight, woke at 4:30am, and hailed an autorickshaw to meet the train to Agra; bumped along amid massive trucks, donkeys pulling carts, piles of garbage, cows roving, dogs crossing, bicycle rickshaws, old men on corners circling steaming pots.
We entered the station after brushing off a hustler who insisted our tickets must be stamped at some tourist office.
The floor was covered by men, women and children, sleeping or sitting in colorful saris, robes and headwraps. A man with a long beard rolled over, checked a pint of whiskey, found it empty, bought a newspaper.
We stepped over the blues, reds, oranges, and yellows, and waited by the track.

III.

From the hotel terrace we watched the sun rise and fall over the Taj Mahal.
At dawn monkeys ruled the city rooftops, disappearing within the first hour of light.
The second day the girls were sick (bad chai). I explored the Red Fort, and

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hired a driver to cross the Yamuna River.

On the bank opposite the Taj, I gazed upstream to where funeral pyres smoked. The remains were dumped into the river, with open sewers running the lengths of Agra. Men, children and buffalo bathed downstream - in water, sewage and ashes; disease and wisdom.

Sitting in traffic, the driver described his wife and kids, and other women:

"You go home every night and eat vegetarian food, veg, veg, veg ... sometimes you feel like non-veg. I've tried American, French, Japanese, Israeli, British girls. What's your favorite?"

"Brazilian," I said.

"My favorite is Japanese."

"Why Japanese?"

"Small hole," he said, and we laughed.

Just over the bridge we passed the statue of a pitch-black god, smiling as it held a white mask.

IV.

The long train ride to Jaipur.

By the doors they shouted call and response, the leader singing out in Hindi:

"Na n-na na n-na, hey!"

The group replying:

"Na n-na na n-na, hey!"

He would alter it:

"Na n-na na n-na, heee-EY!"

The others through laughter:

"Na n-na na n-na, heee-EY!"

Loudest towards women carrying water jugs through the passing brown farmland.

Our seatmates changing periodically at country depots. Two teenage girls sat facing me; I glanced at shining nose rings, and flashes of skin beneath blue and green saris.

V.

In the pink walled city of Jaipur, I entered a store with men huddled around a television, watching the final minutes of the India/South Africa cricket match.

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When India prevailed we cheered, then they returned to their stalls, where one screwed me on the price of a t-shirt.

VI.

"Some Tibetans, with their charity money, won't walk alongside the locals!"

We met an American woman who had studied with the Dalai Llama in Dharmasala.

"In the West we're attached to material things. Here they're poor, but they embrace things ... they flow. Even the taxi drivers flow. Have you seen how they change lanes without looking? They just know. Do you love it too?"

"I love it and hate it," I said. "There are times in traffic ... 10,000 horns, the cows and camels and garbage and fumes ... I hate it. And there are times I love it. Sometimes you breathe the pollution and feel alive."

The last sentiment was from the Bukowski Tapes.

"I've never thought of it like that, but I agree. I love it and hate it. Wow! You've arrived! You should go to an ashram."

"Some go to an ashram and stay for years, some take a look and keep moving."

This from the Chan/Zen folk.

I felt like adding 'school is incidental to true learning', but let it slide, she was on her trip, I was on mine.

VII.

After grabbing our bags at the station, and refusing payment for a ride to the hotel, the driver charged triple the going rate for a city tour.

We would emerge from the sites where he got a cut, to find him chewing tobacco with other drivers, spitting red onto the streets.

Jantar Mantar was a complex of giant instruments built centuries earlier to interpret the skies. I have friends who laugh at astrology; they go to the store, and believe their apartments still exist.

At the Maharaja tombs the guide described a succession of rulers:

"This Maharaja was 7 feet tall and weighed 400 pounds. He died at age 35. He had 100 wives and 200 girlfriends. He didn't have children."

"Why no children?" I asked.

"Bad luck," he said, then whispered, "I'll tell you later."

Later the girls were ahead taking pictures.

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"Remember the guy with 100 wives and 200 girlfriends?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"He didn't have any children because he had an 18 inch penis."

He made a fist and held out his forearm.

"One night of sex and the girls died."

Helena walked back, "What are you guys talking about?"

"I'll tell you later," I said.

VIII.

A twilight cruise for wedding guests traced the Kerala coast. Fishermen stared out from their docks, indifferent to waved greetings. Until one beckoned, faced the audience, and, with a manic smile, frantically humped the air.

IX.

After the festivities I bid farewell and flew to Goa.

I shared a taxi to the beach areas with an Austrian woman visiting yoga retreats.

On familial karma: "I inherited helplessness from my mother."

Television: "Everything you view ... the commercials, the violence, it stays with you."

Acknowledged the holiness in everybody and everything; uneasy with killing: "We don't judge people, only actions."

I really wanted to fuck her.

X.

The path to shore was blocked by a pack of cows eating garbage. At a beach bar I watched the sun set over the Arabian Sea. Before nightfall a line of cows filed by on the sand.

XI.

The large mosque in Delhi was closed for prayers.

Sidewalk vendors displayed animal carcasses and spices.

A fight broke out between a pedestrian and a man on a bike pulling an

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overloaded cart.

I entered the winding alleyways of one-room shops.

Two children on a balcony yelled down to a friend, disappearing as I approached.

Five paces later it hit:

A balloon filled with liquid, directly between the shoulder blades.

Determined for minor triumph, I continued as if nothing happened.

Around the bend I checked my shirt:

Water, not urine.