



IN THE PARK OF THE PLAYERS

Sunday, December 18, 2016 – Amritsar (India) Narain Nagar

31.63178,74.870419

The young man lies there inert. Half an arm's length away from his bare feet, his sneakers lie in the grass with his socks neatly tucked into them. His legs are slightly bent, yet everything about him appears straight – as if his body is the pointer of a big clock. The pointer does not move, though. It does not roll, does not stretch, does not scratch; for hours there is no twitching, no ticking. Nonetheless, the dial changes. That's because about 100 gentlemen are sitting in small groups around the young man on the ground, playing cards with concentration.

Sweep is the name of the game. Every now and then one of them gets up to switch to another group of players, or to take a break or go to the loo. There are trees growing out of the toilet block, so the gents pee casually against its outer

wall. You can be only as disciplined as the conditions allow.

Sunday in Amritsar. The little park a bit south of the station has no name. The leaves of the shrubs are covered with a dense, pale brown coat of dust. Garbage scars the floor: empty soft drink bottles, packets of cigarettes, packages of pills, and playing cards are strewn around – as though somebody has flung cards out of their pack in anger. At my feet, too, lies a King in the grass. I'm seated on one of the four benches anchored here, and I feel as if I'm holding court. Because some man or the other keeps coming by to sit down by my side and question what the stranger wants here.

Sayu, the painter, comes here every Sunday, even in summer: «Then we play under the trees.» Now in winter we allow the sun to warm our bo-



dies, he says, and rubs his hands together. He asks me the same question that the others do. And, as always, I have the same response to give: Naturally I have visited the Golden Temple that looms majestically over the waters of nectar. Naturally, I have seen how thousands are fed there for free, served by volunteers. I have also peered into the utensil containing 2000 litres of dal, curried linsen broth. I am a tourist – I know what I have to do. Sayu seems to not notice the sleeping youth. When I bring him to his attention, Sayu shrugs his shoulders, indifferent.

In the centre of the park stands a magnificent fountain adorned with small tiles in various shades of blue – a playful sculpture, similar to those erected in many countries around the globe in the sixties. Vikham, who earns his livelihood in a rice mill, says he has never seen water in the well – and he has been coming here for many years, twenty, perhaps more. With a matchstick he lights a small, brown stump: «This is a beedi; everyone smokes that here.» He, too, cannot tell me anything about the young man. Should I be worried?

Numerous bicycles, Vespas and cycle-rickshaws are parked alongside the park's fence. Some

cycle-rickshaw drivers are stretched out in siesta on their three-wheeled vehicle: their upper body on the folded roof that protects passengers from the sun and rain, their buttocks on the seat, feet on the handlebars.

Amidst them stands Vish's bicycle. On its luggage carrier is fixed a slightly rusty box, from the centre of which protrudes a large aluminum kettle. When a player calls out an order every now and again Vish opens his pot, sinks a dry flat bread in the chickpea soup, brings out the bread again, garnishes it with onion, mint, green chilli, and a strange sauce – and takes it to the hungry on the playground. There's a stainless-steel cup with water for free. The chana kulcha made by Vish tastes of cumin, coriander, ginger and garlic, a bit sour, a little sweet, slightly spicy – as filling and as much of a comfort food as a little Sunday roast. Most people in the Punjab are vegetarian.

At the edge of the maidan, a pig family grunts through the grass. The mother looks like a wild sow, with dark fur and bristles. One of her piglets is dark, but two are pink. You can almost see the dance of the genes in this constellation. I saw such creatures, probably urban feral domestic pigs, trotting through Amritsar here and





there, especially along the railway tracks, where only the untouchables and their children are otherwise to be seen. According to the optician Pikschem, who wants to buy my iPad, these pigs belong to nobody. Could I just shoot one if I wished to? «Sure, no problem!» he says laughingly, baring his golden molars. Evidently, as an optician you do not need to depend on the dentists offering their services behind the station on the open road.

Only now does it occur to me that something is missing here that is otherwise always part of India when people congregate: Noise. Nowhere here is a radio blaring, nobody here is testing his speakers. All you hear is the barking of dogs, the cawing of crows, the distant honk and clonk of traffic, and the occasional horn of Indian Railways' long, blue trains trundling through the city at walking pace – often ten hours late, or more. The Indian signal sounds different from the shrill warning whistle of European locomotives: it's darker, longer, grander, more like the horn of a big ship. Every train seems to have a slightly different tone, that sometimes holds a note of something

forlorn, or nostalgic, or even grim. I also hear the horns of the trains at night, because I sleep in a hotel just north of the station. Sometimes they honk over and over again, almost desperately. I can see then in my imagination how the little wild boar run around somehow disoriented by the headlights.

Gradually, the shadows lengthen. It's getting palpably cooler, and Amritsar is preparing for the next cold winter night, with temperatures below zero. The first men finish their game, put their shoes on, exit chattering. Only when the shadows cast by the trees reach his body does the young man finally stir, turning his face to the last rays of the warming sun. Does he want to continue lying there? Shouldn't he be roused lest he freeze? I seem to be the only one that notices him. Am I the only one that can see him? Or do I, do all of us here, exist only in his dreams? Then it's certainly better that we let him sleep a little more.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.

The German version of this text has first been published on Friday, January 20, 2017 in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, p. 66.



PARKED TIME

Friday, August 11, 2017 – Chandigarh (India) Government Museum and Art Gallery

30.749160,76.787485

Here, time stands as still as the oppressive tropical air. The partition walls, the wallpaper, the vitrines, the lighting, the armchairs: nothing appears to have changed since the museum opened back in 1968, nothing seems to have shifted. Even the old Sikh, with his long, white beard, guarding the Department of Indian Modernism seems to be a part of the furniture. With his slumped head and his lanky limbs, he resembles Lehmbruck's *Seated Youth*.

His posture has nothing accidental about it; even when he slumbers he does not look like a fatigued guard. He has not nodded off in an armchair, he has retired; he does not just doze, he has taken on the pose of the doze. It is in the order of things that he has not simply taken off his slippers, but has placed them tidily under his chair.

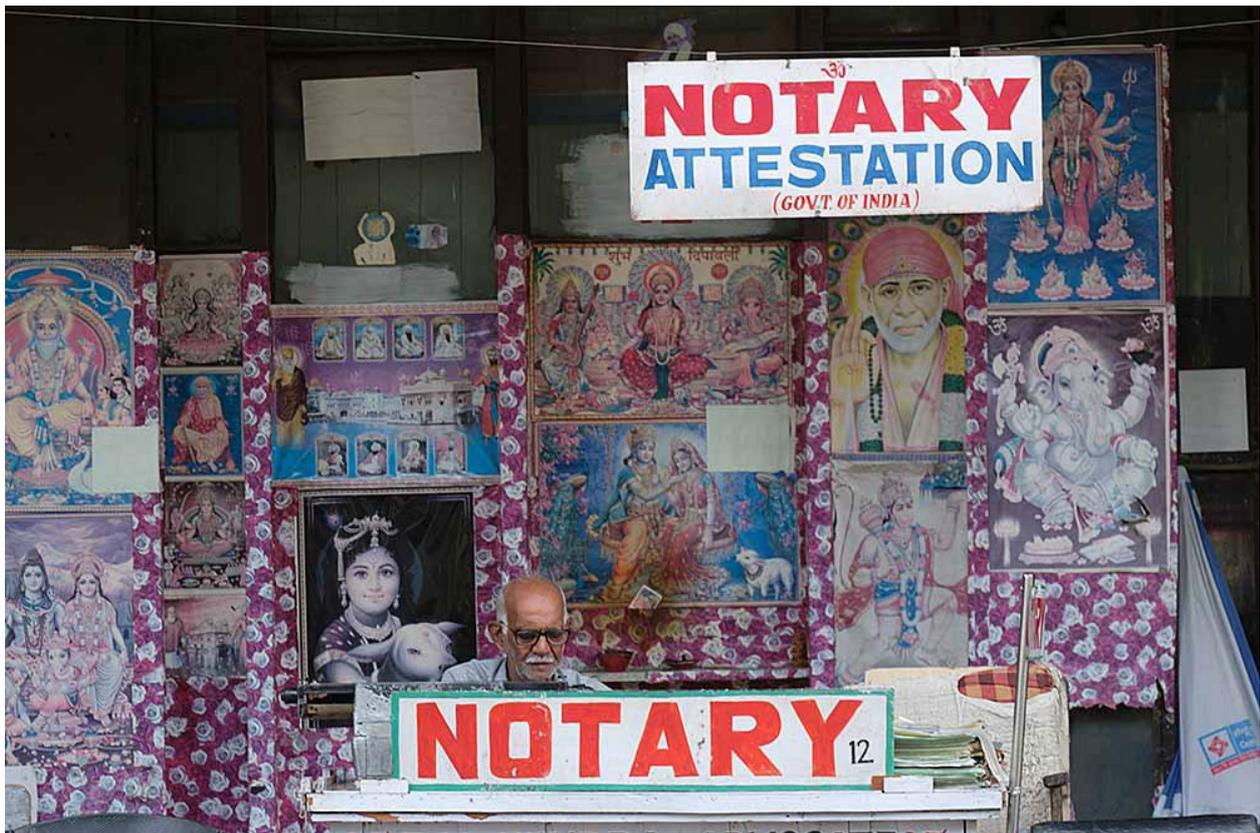
He's probably aware that the position of his feet mimics that of the *Pilgrim Guru Nanak* traversing the landscape right behind him. The elder Sikh has dropped off the clock of daily life; he has slipped from the fleeting realm of the visitor into the timeless world of museum pieces – for the duration of his working hours as a slumbering guard, at any rate.

To his right is an empty Bräuer chair: Should one take that as an invitation to sit down and observe the guard? Is it any surprise that the fan on his left is not whirring? Sculptures do not need a cooling wind.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.

The German version of this text has first been published in *Kunstbulletin* 10/2017, p. 192.





THE CONTRACT

Saturday, August 12, 2017 – Chandigarh (India) Sector 17, Bridge Market

30.741381,76.785071

It was the ideal moment. How often in life does one turn a corner and suddenly encounter a hundred notaries waiting for customers – for customers who do not want to bestir themselves this afternoon, the heat of which hits like a sticky wet cloth in the face. The morning rain has brought the city scant cooling. The sun is still obscured by a sulphur-hued cloth, but she has long since regained her power. Evidence of the rain lies only in the small puddles that have formed here and there – and in the mirrors formed by their waters are reflected the mighty concrete buildings that crumble so swiftly and consistently that you have no time to estimate their age. Some may have originated in the 1960s, when Le Corbusier designed the planned city of Chandigarh for the Punjabis shattered by the Partition – at the express request of Ja-

waharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India at the time. Other blocks may have been erected in more recent years. Still unfinished and already decaying goes hand-in-hand here.

It is likely the notaries' clients were waylaid by the Indian Air Force Wind Orchestra, which sells cheesy Bollywood songs and hits in the main square of Sector 17. Furthermore, the circus troupe of the local police is traipsing around, whirling its old bayonet-based wooden rifles diligently through the air. In three days the country is to celebrate the 70th anniversary of its independence, and today already I've seen a father, with glistening eyes, holding up the tricolor with his right hand while dragging his pale-skinned son through the crowd with his left hand. The child, also dressed in the colours of the national flag, seemed less awed by



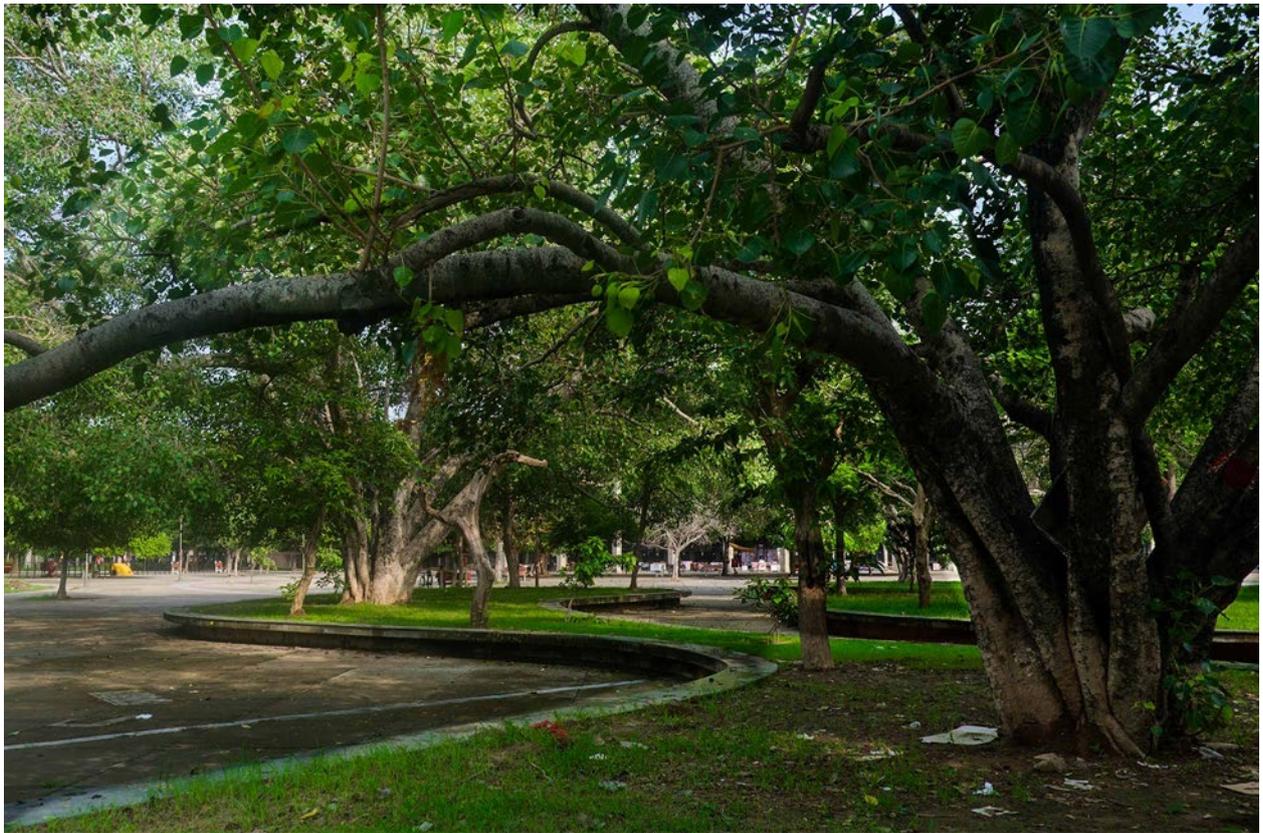
the occasion. Be that as it may, what's the slogan of the Air Force that's so beautiful? «People First. Mission Always.»

The notaries have sat down at their tables or pushed two chairs together to form a make-shift couch. Others have made themselves comfortable on the benches standing under the numerous trees in the place. The trees grow partly directly out of the pavement, partly from earth islands bordered by elegantly curved, dark grey marble-clad walls. Ebenezer Howard's 19th-century idea of the Garden City, in which Le Corbusier oriented himself, is realized almost by itself in terribly humid Chandigarh. Le Corbusier's idea of a rational city plan characterised by clear functional urban concepts is another issue altogether. This has not only to do with the notorious heterogeneity of the Indian population, whose vastly differing needs, capacities, possibilities and manners of reaction are difficult to calculate. The belief that people can be educated (or seduced) by architectural measures into a adhering to a certain behavioural pattern has led to some disillusionment in other parts of the world, too. Chandigarh is far from being the only city in which, for example, great effort is invested in maintaining a *Pleasure Valley* that nobody really wants to enjoy.

Some of Corbusier's ideas may seem outdated today, but in the capital of Punjab and Haryana many still clutch, with almost heroic fidelity, onto the programs masterminded by this city father from Switzerland. This is illustrated, for example, by the construction of the Cathedral or Assembly or the recently opened Tourist Information Centre in Corbusier style. However, many buildings are in a gruesome state of disrepair. The City History Museum is so badly run that there is often no electricity and you have to move from exhibit to exhibit using a torch. What's more, the city occasionally even sells original furnishings from the founding period: In around 2010, for instance, the chairs from the Capitol Complex appeared at an auction in London. Consequently, it is difficult to tell what approach the authorities actually wish to take.

Chandigarh is a monument of modernity. This is certainly not a simple inheritance in a country characterised by grave poverty and social injustice. Questions pertaining to the preservation of monuments often seem like a horrible luxury. On the other hand, there is money for so much...

The only notary who is awake at his post is P.V. Walia, whose services include marriage contracts, certified translations, charters of all kinds,





and affidavits. He sits on Seat No. 12. For what, at first glance, looks like a random collection of flying traders in legal matters the set-up is actually organized. And the long, pillared hall in front of the District Magistrate and Collector's Office, where about a hundred lawyers have set up their office tables, armchairs and typewriters, is also officially honoured as Notary in the city plan. On the wall behind his stand, Walia has propitiated the entire Hindu pantheon: Vishnu, Lakshmi, Krishna, Ganesh, Sai Baba and Co, who shower their blessing on businesses, contracts, oaths, and promises.

Evidently, even Walia has nothing to do. He repeatedly cleans his glasses and looks expectantly out into the distance. But customers are just not showing up. I seize the opportunity to go to his stand. I inquire if he can set up an employment contract. I tell him I would like to have a document stating that the purpose of my journey through India is work, even though I am travelling on only my own behalf.

«Who's the employer» Walia asks.

«Me.»

«And what is the name of the employee?»

«That's me too.»

«Then why do you want a contract?»

I point to the seller of ayurvedic remedies, who has not seen a single customer in the last three hours, and who, out of sheer boredom, has not stopped scribbling the name of his little display with a frond in the floor dust. I point to the chai stand, the seller of lime soda, and the bicycles with the pots of chickpeas. «All these people have an employment contract only with themselves,» I tell him. «And yet, even if there is no clientele in sight, it seems perfectly natural that they are at their posts.»

Walia shakes his head. «I cannot issue you with a contract,» he replies. «That would be...», he removes his glasses and rubs his eyes with his palms: «That would be like marrying yourself.»

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



JESUS

Tuesday, May 23, 2017 – Srinagar (India) Gole Market Hospital Road

34.086015,74.795985

Now I've lost him. For over an hour I've been following him across the old town of Srinagar: from Buschwara near Dal Lake to Gole Market Mosque precinct, along the canals, across bridges and piazzas, through bustling streets, parks and isolated back alleys. The Flying Salesman was my perfect guide through this city, and I didn't think he'd elude me out of the blue. Even when I could not see the helium balloons and bright pink cotton candy he bore on a wooden cross on his shoulder, I could still hear the trill of his bell. But now, all of a sudden, he's invisible: gone from the very face of the earth. And I'm standing, bemused, behind a group of men and women who are watching, spellbound, something taking place beyond a metal fence of a little park.

I kind of rue the fact that I've stubbornly trailed after the balloon man and ignored other inviting options en route. Why hadn't I followed the English teacher who had invited me for a cup of tea in one of the gloomy, cheap bakeries that adorn every corner of the city? Blackholes in which sooty-faced men prepare breads such as girda (czot), which need to ferment for a long time, have a multi-layered crust, gleam golden, and taste so fresh. «The bakers come from far away,» the teacher had told me, «from the mountains. They make the best bread, and a good tea.» I could have stayed longer even with the butcher, sitting behind a suspended leg of lamb, who had wanted to know whether he could make a deal with it in my home country, and who'd offered to cut me a piece from the fat-lined chunk of meat dang-





ling beside his head. «Your hotel can prepare it for you,» he'd assured me. An offer I refused.

Or, I could have paused to watch the young man coating metal cauldrons with copper in his little shack. The vegetable corner at the bridge would have been interesting, too. Or the half-drowned houseboat called *Venus*. Or the fisherman with his swimming dog. Ah yes, I could have even testified as an eyewitness in a car accident – luckily, just sheet metal damage, albeit severe.

I could at the very least have accepted the invitation of the Muslim gentleman, clad in a snow-white salwar kameez, to accompany him. «The media lie,» he had told me. «There is no problem between Hindus and Muslims here.» He was on his way to see an old Brahmin mother, who lay dying. He was going to kneel beside her bed and pray for her. «Come along, take a picture of it! For the world to know the truth!» The journalist in me had momentarily considered bring unfaithful to the balloon seller. But the son in me had said no. I would in no circumstances have wanted any Chinese or Indian tourist to photograph my mother on her deathbed – forget tourist, not even the Pope himself, had he been around to drop down on his knees next to her.

It was a little boy who led me to suddenly lose track of my guide, actually. He had unexpectedly surfaced next to me at an intersection, grabbed my hand and pulled me with great determination to the entrance of a small park: «Look, this is Jesus, he heals people here,» the child had announced, pointing to a big-nosed bearded man, standing barefoot and shirtless next to a military tent, surrounded by men, children and women sitting on the grass in the park, or watching the scene from across the street. Just as I'd reached the tent, one of the spectators jumped up from the floor and grabbed the arm of Jesus to make him pose with him for a photo. Jesus obviously did not feel so good, he smiled a bit, then turned his head away. I doubt he had anything against the photo; I reckon he felt he'd been sort of hustled by the gent. Too polite, too kind to free himself from the other's clutches, he wove his way out of the scene in his own fashion, without quite departing. I discreetly pressed the trigger and quickly said goodbye in order not to embarrass Jesus further.

Now, I'm standing on the road outside the park, wondering where my balloon man is. Surely he did not lead me here on purpose? It seems strange to me that I have lost sight of him right





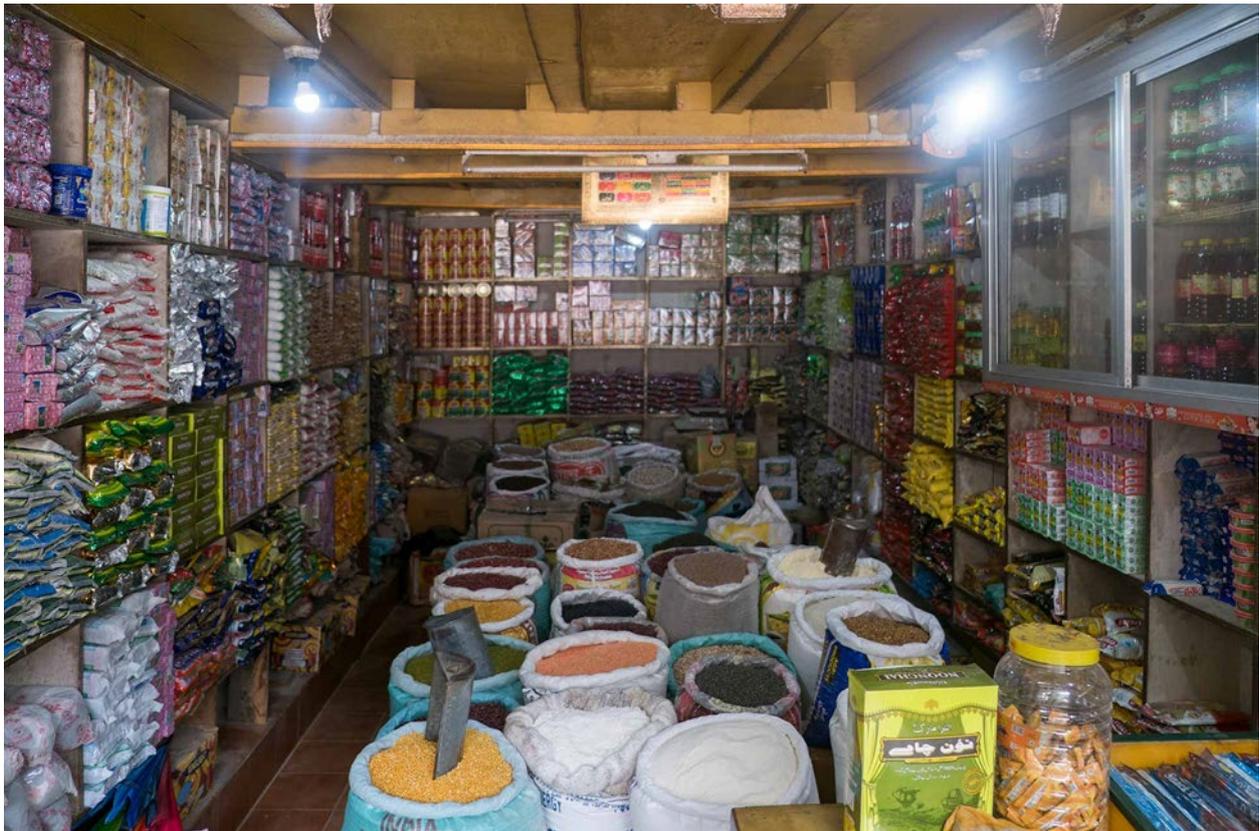


at this spot. It is also extraordinary that I am not being gawked at. Because, usually, I'm the centre of attraction in Kashmir. Here, however, the onlookers turn their backs on me, hang on the railing and gawk at the goings-on inside the park. *Mondo novo* comes to my mind as an image, that intriguing painting by Tiepolo, that portrays a gathering of rapt viewers from behind – and cleverly does not reveal what it is that is attracting their attention. I look at the map in my hand and note that I am standing before the entrance to the largest hospital in the region: Little wonder then that Jesus is doing his salvation work here. Wild theories that I've come across on the Internet flash through my mind. The Buddhists, for example, are convinced that it was in Kashmir that Jesus spent the time between his youth and his first appearance as a preacher and that he was familiar with the tenets of Buddhism. The Ahma-

diyya sect, on its part, believes that Jesus survived the cross and escaped incognito to Kashmir, where he taught for decades under the name of Yuz Asaf and died of old age. His grave is believed to lie in Srinagar. Jesus Yuz Asaf is believed to have prophesied the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad – but Christians insist he was referring to the Holy Spirit. Muhammad, Buddha, the Holy Spirit, Jesus. This is heavy artillery for a minor intersection in the heart of Srinagar.

I go up to two young men sitting in the shade a short distance away the crowd. They do not seem to be very interested in Jesus. «Who is this man?» I ask them. This is a dervish from the north, says one, «a very powerful holy man.» «Oh, come on,» the other man retorts, shaking his head: «That's no holy man, that's just a crazy old guy!»

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



JUST A TREMBLE OF THE HAND

Wednesday, May 24, 2017 – Uri (India) main street

34.079101,74.053100

«What a picture book!» I think as I walk past the house for the first time. Its rooms on the ground floor and first floor open into the street in a way that makes them look like stages on which different pieces are being enacted simultaneously – or like pictures in a comic strip, with all the protagonists appearing to be waiting for something at that particular instant. I proceed to first photograph the beautiful butchery at the entrance to the nearby market before returning to position myself in front of the house to take pictures. As soon as I've taken the first photographs, the man from the shop on the ground floor approaches me and invites me in for tea. I am confident it's an innocent gesture of hospitality as there is no business in there that would require the gent to cheat on a tourist like me. This is certainly the reason that tourists almost

never ever get lost in Uri – something my taxi driver Kamran Ullah Khan, who ferried a banker from Jammu to this town for a business meeting two years earlier, also believes.

Inside the house, I sit between sacks of lentils, rice and spices, bags of sugar and salt, soap and cans of ghee or mustard oil, cigarettes, detergents and coffee powder. Why had I photographed the house, the shopkeeper wants to know. Because it seems like a comic strip to me or like a collection of stages, I answer truthfully – much like the rice terraces that I'd seen on my way to Uri. His clever eyes gaze at me blankly. «You are Mohamed,» I say to him in an attempt to defuse the situation. I had read the name on the sign above the store. No, he says, Muhammad is his father. His name is Pervaz. «Second generation shop,» I say, reali-

sing at that instant that the man is uninterested in making small talk with me. He has something to say to me, and he says it in a calm, warm voice. I understand only a few words, fragments, but one sentence he says over and over again rings clear: «This is a very difficult time.» I believe that he has somehow given up – hope – for his generation. «This is no life,» I comprehend, and: «Who knows, perhaps the next generation will be better off.» Pervaz smiles at me. He also smiles at the customers he serves in-between. But there is a sadness in his voice, a sadness I have sensed during my conversations with other men, too, in Kashmir.

He tears open a packet of biscuits for me and places them on a piece of newspaper. As he hands me this improvised plate, a small convoy of the Indian Army enters the village. In the first car, which is a bullet-proof jeep of sorts, a sergeant is standing with his legs apart and instructing the pedestrians with shrill whistles and peremptory gestures to get immediately off the road. On the side of the female, sit two soldiers donning face-masks pointing their machine-guns at the scattering crowd. The jeep is followed by three armoured cars with a rotating firing cockpit and small windows from which

rifle-tips protrude in all directions. The vehicles move at top speed through the road and disappear, within seconds, in a cloud of dust. The spooky encounter is over.

Those living in Kashmir must be accustomed to having weapons aimed at them. At every turn you encounter thick, barbed wire-wrapped barracks and posts from which guns aim at the surrounding area. Soldiers and policemen are omnipresent in heavy gear, with bullet-proof vests, helmets, armour, shields, machine guns, and tear-gas guns. These are not the sleepy hoods with their sticks and the old rifles you see on India's streets, they are ever-alert elite soldiers and professional fear-mongers – one glimpse into their faces is enough to tell you that they will use their weapons without hesitation. Their authoritarian demeanour and the aplomb with which they patrol the streets, inspect cars, and interrogate passers-by (including tourists like me) for no reason, leave no doubt that they are not here as guardians. Protectors perform differently. The main enemies of these soldiers are not sitting on the other side of the border fence. In Kashmir India operates as an occupying power, and never camouflages the fact. «Incredible India,» as the country's tourism









office is ever happy to advertise, indeed here has an incredible side to it. In Kashmir, India acts as a superpower, enforcing its hegemonic interests regardless of losses.

The rhetoric must have been quite different a few years before. In the valley of the river Jhelum, which stretches from Baramulla via Uri to the Pakistan border, the Pier Panjal Brigade and another troop with elaborate barracks project themselves as, «Saviours of the Valley». There is even a lookout point in the middle of the barracks precinct, which once probably afforded a view of the development of dam technology in the valley. In recent times, however, the trees around the platform have grown so tall that one can hardly see anything even two metres away. Originally intended to provide tourists with a nice story, today the place is more likely to keep visitors away from Kashmir – to scare them with reports of cruel events at the border or at least of harassment, such as subjecting them to five (!) baggage checks at the airport, during which even innocuous items such as tweezers and tiny bottles of mosquito repellent spray are taken away. India started to enforce this strategy about three years ago, according to people like Kamran, who are desperate for tourism.

And with success – as a walk through the capital Srinagar with its endless souvenir shops goes to prove. There is a gaping emptiness everywhere: Yes, even in a beautiful colonial building on the Bund, which, according to the Lonely Planet and Google's Maps, was once meant to house the Kashmir Government Arts Emporium, but now houses police barracks.

I so fervently wish Incredible India would handle Kashmir in a friendly manner so that I would not have to deal with the tension of the situation. But the reality is that the presence of the occupying power is so aggressive that I simply cannot overlook it. It pushes aside everything else: the beauty of the paddy fields and the temples, the gardens and lakes, the sweet cherries and the glimmering gold saffron tea. And if you point a machine gun at me while asking me the reason for my walk through the old town, it makes me not only frantic with fear (because a shitty thing such as an unintentional gunshot can happen in life), but also fills me with a rage I have never felt before. Anyone who lives in Kashmir, who wants to survive in Kashmir, needs to be able to deal with such feelings. As the noise of the patrol fades, I look into Pervaz's face. It shows no reaction. But I notice a



slight trembling in the hand that is holding out the newspaper with the biscuits. But is that perhaps merely my impression – a matter of kitschy concern? But how should I react to this situation? Do I have any choice other than to notice the tremor of the hand holding out the biscuits? Pervaz got to articulate his message. I may have understood only a small part of what he said – but didn't I understand exactly what he meant? I have nothing

to say about that, nothing of significance. But I did sit with him on the same stage for a moment. And even if I can leave again, the sad picture-book in which I have played the role of an extra for a fleeting moment – the time it requires to sip a cup of sweet tea – henceforth belongs, in my view, to the library of the world.

Translated from German by Gunwanthi Balam.



IS THE JOURNEY NOT THE DESTINATION?

Sunday, 6. August, 2017 – Markha Valley (India) Thachungste

33.806316,77.559522

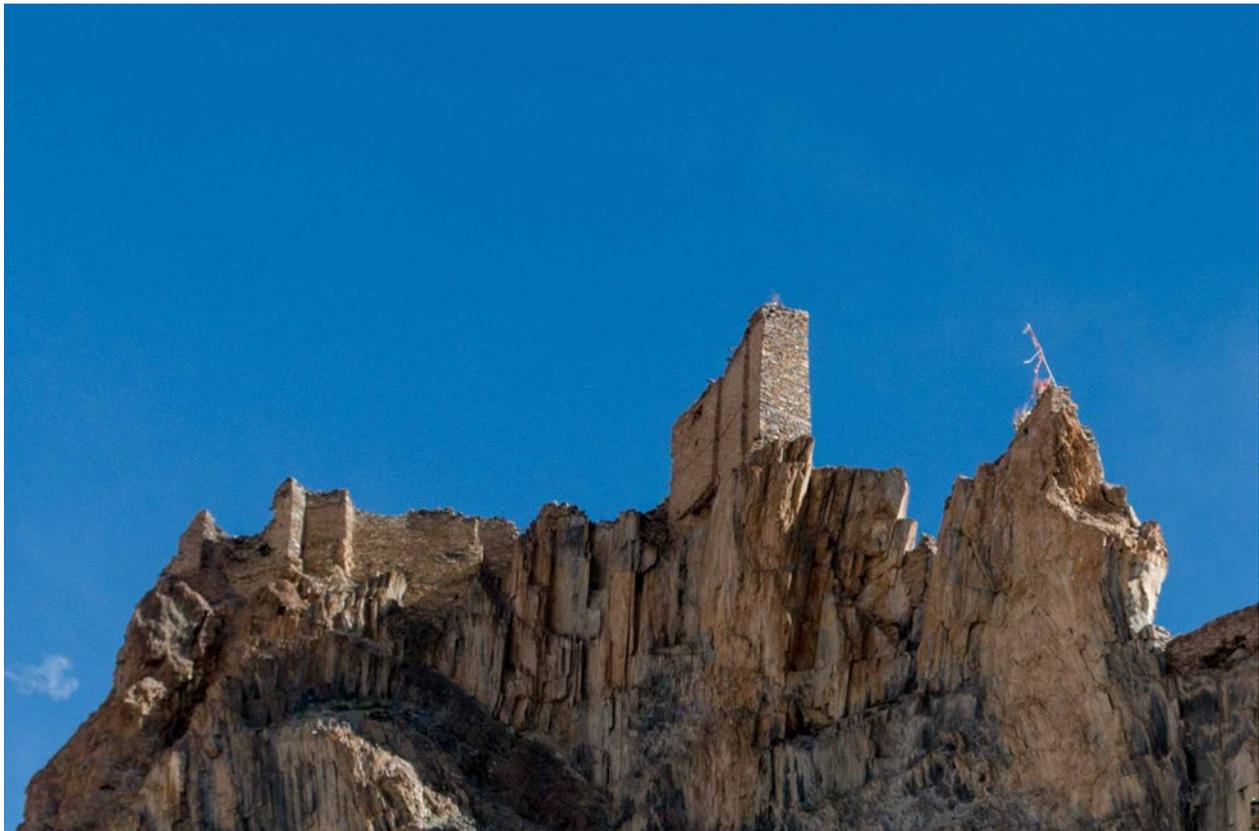
What spurs me on while travelling is the constant expectation that, beyond the next bend, the world will look quite different. And that has to do with more than just the changing landscapes, other people and their peculiar customs, or with new experiences. What I always hope for is for a revelation of sorts: the hope that every turn will usher in a new life, a fresh perspective, a deep existential insight.

During no other way of moving around is this expectation more pronounced than it is while one is walking, especially walking in the mountains, where the view of the next valley, the next world, is repeatedly obscured by crests; where the earth presents itself in contradictory fragments, as it were. This may have to do with the fact that while hiking, the change from landscape to landscape is

linked to our own body in a unique way; it is associated with the effort you put in. And also with the abundant time you have to enjoy the anticipation that the next hill, the next plateau, the next gorge will be as different as possible from the slopes, plateaus and ravines you've seen thus far. Because it is this change that gives travel a substantial bit of its meaning; indeed, the keen perception of these differences also determines whether or not we feel a sense of excitement.

The Markha Valley, which is easily traversed without a tent and without a guide, treats the hiker time and again to an exhilarating range of landscapes. From Sara, the road leads through a broad, gently rising valley for a long time, then runs up a steep ravine to Hangkar Gongma, where the remains of a fortress boldly planted on the ridge of a mountain



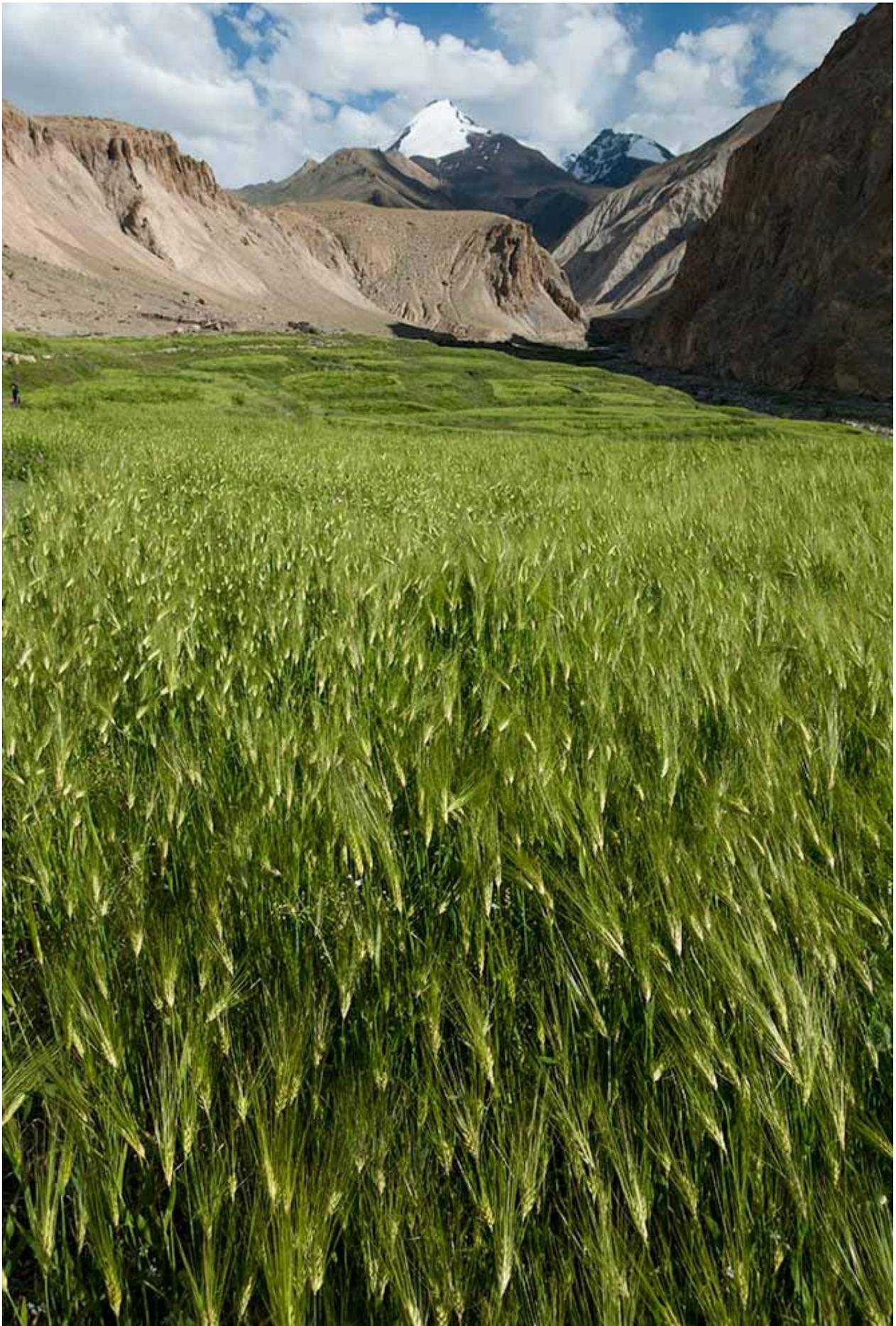


astonished me. Trudging past whitewashed stupas, I reached the shores of an ocean of green-shining barley. The snouty stalks are gently nudged back and forth by the wind, small water channels gurgle at my feet. In the background, gleams the north flank of the 6400-metre high Kang Yaze, which is occupied by a large glacier. Through a ravine, the walls of which present themselves to my eye as badly weathered, larger-than-life paintings, I entered the high plateau of Thachungtse, accompanied by marmots and countless rodents with huge ears. And then I was standing next to a small lake half-way to Nimaling, from where I will gradually trek up to the 5300-metre high pass, Gongmaru La. The immense mountains of the Himalayas now no longer looked unduly large or rather unreal to my eyes, no longer like a theatrical backdrop or the painted background of an old movie shot entirely in the studio.

The constantly altering and increasingly barren landscapes I am trekking through create a constant tension. And it is this tension that drives me on – even if my head pounds harder and harder, and my breath gets shorter and shorter.

Every new perspective affords me with a thrill. At the same time I notice that after every bend a vague sense of disappointment creeps into my mind. That has perhaps to do with the fact that the new world is just part of the revelation that I hope for. The other part is less obvious, more complicated: more an inkling than a realisation. It is not only about a change of scene or about variety; at the same time it's not about the new: on the contrary, it is about the encounter with something deeply familiar, the expectation of an echo in something akin to a built-in prototype, a primeval landscape in me – the mountains and valleys of which I cannot quite describe. It may be the hope that the emergence of a foreign vista could signify a homecoming – in a homeland that in all probability exists only in that expectation. If that is indeed so, one must conclude that every going-away, every departure, is fundamentally motivated by a doomed yearning for a primordial form of arrival. In such a scenario, the journey is not the destination, after all.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.





DAY OF THE DRAGON

Tuesday, August 15, 2017 – Delhi (India) Red Fort, Netaji Subhash Marg

28.655843,77.236541

Odd how vividly I remember the smell wafting into my nose when it happened: of roasty-smoky grilling lamb sweating directly above glowing coals – an aroma that does not go with the carved-pineapple cart I pass by in order to get from the east gate of Red Fort to Chandni Chowk. I remember the aroma triggering heavy pangs of hunger in me – and, immediately after that, I feel the sidewalk shooting at me, making the world flip over, and turning the horizontal strip of the road into a vertical one.

Somehow, I protect my face as well as the camera in my hand from the impact. My upper body lands quite softly on my right shoulder; only my knees knock painfully into hard stone. The next moment, I feel something wet running over my legs. «Blood,» the thought flashes

through my head, and I try rapidly to get half-way up. I look down at myself to find there's no blood; my knees have simply landed in a sauce of sewage and oil glimmering between the street and the pavement.

I'm perched now on the rim of a traffic signal, rubbing my shoulder that has taken the punch of most of my body weight. Floating around my feet in the dark slush from which I have just pulled out my knees, are a few strands of colourful wrapping paper, an aluminum plate, a cardboard coffee mug, and a puri, one of those hollow tiny balls of fried dough (served with a filling of cold mint chutney and tamarind sauce) – which forms a vital part of arguably the most popular street snack in India: Pani-puri. There's also a torn newspaper page with an advertisement of the company, Air-



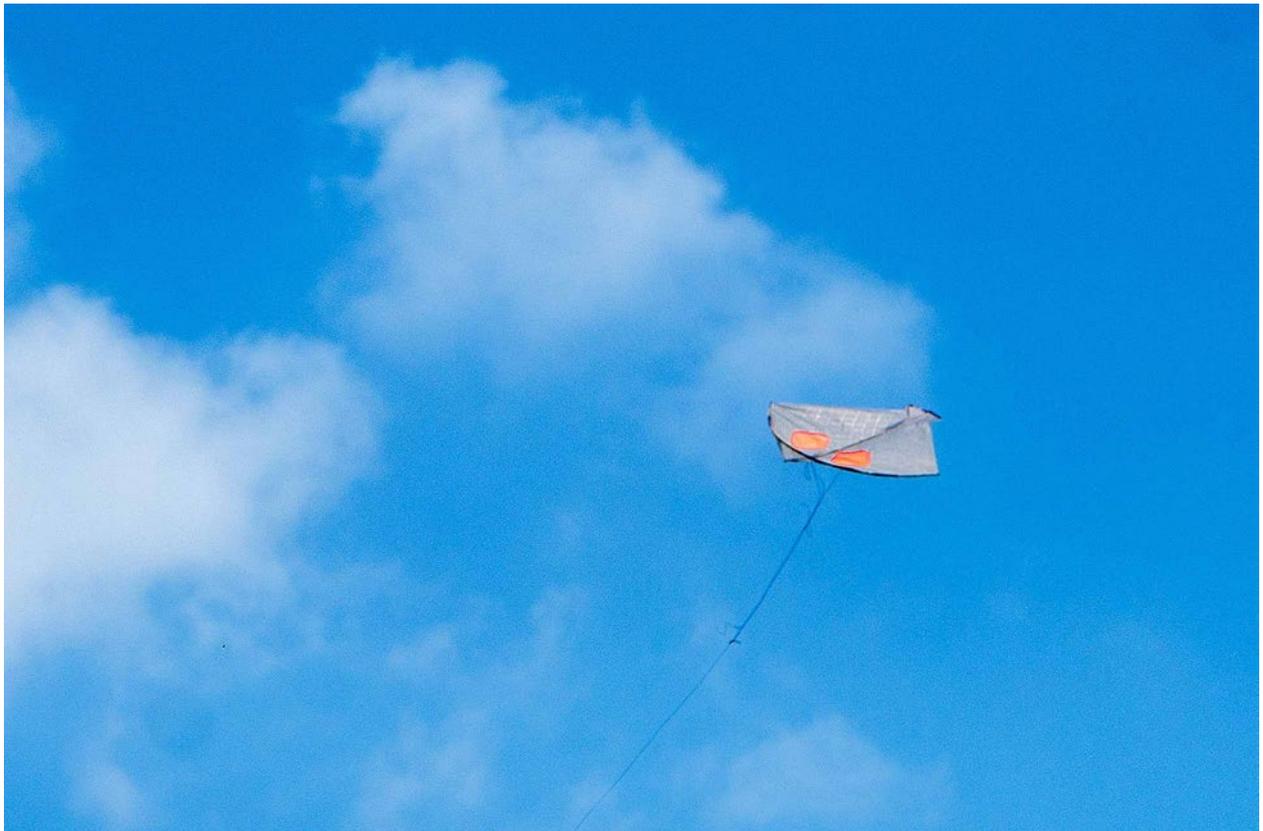
plane, inviting its customers to commemorate the next Eid Mubarak with their Basmati rice. Their wish for a «blessed festival» here probably refers to breaking of the fast on the last day of Ramadan, on the feast of Eid al-Fitr. Ramadan, however, ended in June.

I have to smile at the thought that the bit of road where my knees have accidentally landed is representative of the land: You could paint it and hang it on the wall as an Indian still life. Also, the fact that I went tumbling down right on Independence Day and just in front of the Red Fort seems to me like a lash inflicted by the God of Stumblers – after all, hadn't I adamantly refused

to buy any of the orange-white-and-green striped flags and hats, skull caps, badges, t-shirts and scarves that they had wanted to sell to me in the streets. And hasn't it also been barely three hours since Prime Minister Modi unrolled the Indian flag a few metres from this spot, above the Lahore Gate, whose link with the Indian tricolour proudly flown atop it in 1947 is considered a key moment in the country's struggle for independence? It is a grand occasion: the 70th anniversary of the country's Independence Day.

I realise just how mean a trick the God of Stumblers has played on me when I notice the thread of a paper kite lying on the ground. When I first fell, I'd realised only that my feet had stopped even as my upper body had moved one step forward. But I now see the ball of thread lying there and being tossed around by all manner of forces – by the wind as well as by toes or wheels coming into contact with its widely scattered ends or the loops of its strings. Right through the day, I've watched people getting entangled in kite strings, and admired the dancing movements with which they've freed themselves from the obstacles. I've been even more enthralled by the gestures and expressions of the kite-fliers who act curiously the-





atrical when you do not see the threads in their hands – and when you cannot tell which of the numerous kites soaring in the sky are the ones they are struggling to control by jerking the threads in their hands in a particular way. Who directs here and what is being directed is, at times, confusing to the foreigner's eye. And the doughty kite-fliers suddenly seem like puppets whose movements are manipulated by invisible puppeteers. Sometimes, it appears as if the kite-fliers are engaged in a pantomimical dialogue with a celestial being, perhaps also with one of the great Indian buzzards that dominate the airspace over Indian cities. Some try to impose their will on the paper bird with elegance and tactile agility, others with ferocious power, yet others seem to work in a kind of trance. Like so much else that happens in public spaces, kite flying is also a man thing, a male hobby, albeit without age restrictions. Many little boys also fly kites from rooftops or balconies, some young men directly from the street; and adult men are to be seen operating the paper dragons with utmost enthusiasm, and no alley appears to be too narrow for the sport. No wonder then that the trees and omnipresent electrical installations fill up more and more as the day progresses with torn kites,

which lie trembling and twitching on branches, cables and transformers.

Kite flying on Independence Day has a history. In 1927, patriotic Indians protested with the slogan, «Go Back Simon», against the power of the Simon Commission, which was to draft a constitutional reform for this colony of British India. They also wrote this slogan on paper kites and made them ascend into the skies over Delhi. Since then, kite flying has been one of the traditions used by the people of Delhi to mark Independence Day and celebrate their country's liberation from British rule.

Seen in this perspective, there appears to be a certain symbolic correctness, justice, that I, a Eu-









ropean visitor on Independence Day, mime the fallen kite that has got entangled in the dialectics of local conditions. I notice at this point that I'm sitting on the ground almost in front of the sacred Digambara Jain Temple. This temple runs a bird hospital, where upto 10,000 creatures can be treated — in keeping with the Jain principle of concern for everything that lives. Perhaps I can be admitted to the hospital as a fallen bird. But then it occurs to me that Jains take only vegetarian birds under their wing.

This confronts me with one of the questions that constantly accompanies me on my travels through India. As a tourist in this country, am I simply a harmless parakeet, picking a few grains here and there and adding a bit of beauty to the landscape with its colourful plumage? Or am I a dangerous bird of prey, flying with the kites through the sky and pouncing hungrily at everything alive that it discovers under the ground? If my hunch is correct – if I follow my nose, which right now is being weathered in the world of street food again – I am quite unlikely to be looked after in the Bird Hospital of the Jains.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.







IN THE SNOW WHITE COFFIN

Tuesday, January 3, 2017 – from Khajuraho to Bhopal (India)

(23.955103,78.893055)

I will not shut my eyes tonight. not for a moment. I will withstand it, I will last it out. There is no going back to the good fortune of solid ground under one's feet, no opportunity to get off.

If only the bus would travel a little faster! At walking speed the old Renault plows through the darkness. Every now and then a small fire glows by the roadside, and the outlines of men emerge from the dense fog on the ground. They warm their hands by the fire, their heads hidden in thick shawls. Rarely glows a solitary oil lamp within a house. The petrol pumps shine the brightest.

I should have insisted on getting a regular seat. As it turns out I find they've locked me, with all my luggage, into a Snow White coffin. The narrow, just-about-150-cm-long bunk I'm trapped in, is called a sleeper. In different circumstances,

a sleeper would not be so uncomfortable – but, in the cold! These buses are made for warm nights, and bus companies clearly find investing in a heater for just the few cold hours of the year not worth their while. The wind hisses icily in through the rattling window, whistling venomously through the cracks, and winter enters my limbs through every pore in the skin. The window-pane is misty, water is dripping onto my trousers. I push my feet under my luggage to keep them warm. I crawl into the thin, synthetic fibre blanket I bought shortly before departure, and fold myself into a packet, a bundle, in a bid to reduce my body surface smaller, to make it shrink. But not every position is possible, or helpful, and as the bus leaves no hole covered, the wind proceeds to hit my spine like hammer blows, to turn my ribs blue. A vice sits on my



neck, another sticks into my stomach. From time to time, a coughing bout shakes me. Then I drink sugar water, it helps.

We roll into a small town. Nobody on the street at this hour. I see a skinny cow pushing with all her might against a steel rolling-shutter on which «Hunter» is written in large letters.

The bus rattles into a place, honks loud and cheery, brakes, splutters, trembles, and then suddenly stands still. Through the window I look down on two illuminated handcarts: peanutseller and fruitseller. I could get out, stretch my legs, have a cup of tea. But my body feels so stiff that I'm afraid that I will be unable to fold myself into my glass coffin afterwards. I also feel a pressure on my bladder. No doubt it would be wise to go to

the loo. But I do not want to give away anything from me now. So I stay put and count the minutes to the departure. It is one o'clock in the morning and my destination is still distant, at least four hours away.

I reckon I knew just how uncomfortable this night would be. But there is only one bus from Khajuraho to Bhopal. The trip didn't just happen to me: I had decided I could endure it, that I'd survive it. And even if I'm cold now, if my back hurts, if my stomach feels grim, even if I'm coughing and sugar water seems to be the only friend in my immediate surroundings, I still experience a sense of luck – of sorts.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



A BIRD IN THE CITY OF BUTCHERS

Wednesday, January 4, 2017 – Bhopal (India) Ginnori Road

23.254700,77.409238

The elderly gent with the long beard and the big nose has no desire to be photographed. He laughs shyly, shakes his head, wags his forefinger, tucks his chin into his collar, and bends his head: «No, no, no.» Okay, I get it, I pack the camera away. Thing is, why not? Given that everyone else around here is really keen to have me take their portrait?

The city of Bhopal has a heart of meat. Its darkest chamber is the fish market, housed in a long cellar. Anyone who gets in here becomes a blood-cell that has to be forcibly squeezed through the arteries of the noisy, haggling, laughing, begging, cursing organ. Past the bodies of giant carp that lie on the floor trembling in the throes of death. Over mounds of little silver-and-blood red shiny river fish being shovelled into sacks. Twenty kilos of hil-

sa for 800 rupees. Who will offer a better price? Grab the chance!

The room is not even three metres high, the stalls are just holes in the wall, with the action taking place only in the aisle. On the ground is a swamp of water, blood and fluids which is inexorably seeping into my sneakers and socks. It's as if the place is beginning to digest me. A light bulb flickers and goes out, there is complete darkness in a whole section of the market. A scream, and salty droplets hit my face: a fat eel comes flying out of the darkness, whizzes past me and bounces into the arms of a fat salesman, who drops his scales in fright. The whole heart-chamber guffaws. An old woman takes me by the hand and pulls me to a stall where a man is sitting solemn and quiet on a plastic chair. She tells me to take a picture of him and pinches him hard in the







cheek. «Your son?» I ask, holding the camera with the result in front of her face.

A stab in the left shoulder, I lose my balance, stagger, my backpack hits the wall, and something runs wet over my calves. Two young men have crashed into the cellar from the entrance ramp, carrying a styrofoam box between their thin bodies which is so powerful and heavy that they cannot manage it. Three steps later the box slips from their hands, strikes the ground, crashes, and an avalanche of fish and ice tumbles over their feet, sweeping away a pyramid of carp-heads that a young man with a curly-twirly beard and a turban has painstakingly piled up.

Outside, the sunlight blinds me. Milky brilliance breaks through the street mist. The outer chamber of the Heart of Bhopal is the poultry market, which nestles kidney-shaped against the low-slung building containing the fish cellar. The stalls are located on the fish market street, but the vendors here sell chickens mostly, and some ducks and roosters. At a few spots in-between you can see a goat tied up, wrapped in cloth because the weather is cool. The white-feathered hens are locked in small wire crates in which they can barely stand. Most birds sit quietly, only one chicken crawls about in panic, some others lose a few feathers as they scramble atop the crate. Only the roosters strut about pro-



udly, at eye-level with the customers: they stick out their chests, crow, and generally act as if they have a future.

Even my Big Beard has to sell a chicken – though only one. And that was two hours ago, when I'd first walked the street. He sits crouching and holding the animal with a string, one end of which he has wrapped around the claws of the animal, while the other end hangs on his big toe. The chicken does not seem to have any intention of leaving the dust, though. The man has also tied a bright orange bow around the bird's neck – an accessory that gives it a coquettish appearance. I give the man a bag with a few slices of a small cake I had bought in a nearby bakery. He explains something to me, caresses his chicken, then folds his hands, tilts his head to one side, looks imploringly at the sky, and points tentatively with his right hand. I do not understand him. Does he think that I will buy his chicken from him? For a moment I reflect on the possibility of proceeding on my journey with a chicken by my side. The idea is not unappealing, although I have no idea about how to deal with these creatures.

Now, there's a little boy tugging at my sleeve, asking me to take pictures of his big brother who is

posing proudly on top of a tower of chicken cages – in the coolest of poses, mobile phone glued to his ear, quite like a businessman would: the ultimate Chicken Don.

Is that the reason that Big Beard does not wish to be photographed? Because he has only one chicken to sell? Implausible. He has probably been sitting there for five hours or so, trapped between two stalls, invisible to most who are on a shopping spree on their motorcycles.

The third chamber of the meaty heart of Bhopal is the mutton and beef market. As 40 per cent of the city's population is Muslim, beef consumption is popular here. Even the famous Paya soup I ate the previous day had tasted more like beef than mutton. It's hard to believe that so much gelatine can be drawn out of a goat's hoof; the soup had stood almost upright on the spoon. The beef butchers have their stalls on the bend of the road behind the Sultania hospital, which is not far from the largest Hindu temple in the city. Dark red-and-cream chunks of meat dangle on hooks in the shopfronts, where one showcases one's produce. Behind them the butchers crouch in the dark, cutting the meat on low platforms, removing the fat from the kidneys, burning the hair from the cattle



hooves. They also like to be photographed, posing proudly, with a butcher's knife in their hands.

Suddenly, on the fringe of the intersection with Sultania Road, I see a chicken that is making its way, unnoticed by all, between parked motorcycles. It has a bright orange bow on the neck. This can only be Big Beard's chicken. Only, what had happened? Has it run away from him? Hard to believe. Had he released it? But why would he have done that? Because he could not sell it? I follow the animal, not knowing quite why. The creature leads me over two junctions to the bank of the lower lake, then crawls under a fence, and leaves me standing in a state of suspense.

I hear a call from behind me. I turn around. I'm standing on a four-lane motorway-like, fast-traffic road, the median strip of which is unpaved. The austere shrubs there stand at a distance of perhaps three metres and are protected by a metal fence on both sides. There is a Big Beard standing between two of these little trees and he beckons me. I hesitate only because the street is a veritable death-strip. But then I steel my heart

and skip, like a frightened torero, between the cars and motorcycles over to the median strip. The old man evidently has his dwelling here. He has dug a hole in the ground, set up a fire pit and is frying a flat-bread in an earthen pot. In the bushes behind him, his seven things are hanging in plastic bags. He also has a dog with him that shows me his healthy teeth. The gent invites me to climb over the fence, points to his bread, and cuts it symbolically in the air. I decline with thanks. What about the chicken, I want to know, signalling to him with my arms about the manner in which the bird flaps. He looks at me in puzzlement for a moment, then laughs mischievously, explains something to me, points to his pants, and then to the sky. Again he invites me to a piece of roti, flatbread. I ask if I can take a picture of him. Now, he has no objection to it. I give him a few more rupees and feel the strange need to touch him. In a gesture of farewell, I run my hand over his shoulder and back. It feels dry and warm.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram..



THE MISTRESSES OF THE TIGER

Saturday, 25. March, 2017 – Bhoramdeo (India) Temple Garden

22.114727,81.149144

The Vedas teach us that there is neither rebirth nor death, that the self is merely a breath, a sigh in the breeze, an imprint upon the sands by the sea. But even if we are merely a shooting star, a ghost, let's attempt to leave a mark, a trace – even if it be only a glint of dust on the edge of the path we traverse.

I stand in the garden of the main temple of Bhoramdeo, the outer walls of which bear reliefs, in large number, of couples in visibly ambiguous positions of lovemaking. Alongside them are carvings of masturbating, birthing, urinating and menstruating women. Many visitors come up and speak to me and wish to know if I find the temple beautiful and alluring and nod happily when they hear my stuttering answer: , «Oh, yes, very beautiful.» Nobody addresses the subject that is

graphically depicted in the carvings, though. At least teenagers must giggle. But they do not. Entire school classes traipse by the reliefs – and there is nothing in their behaviour that suggests that they have grasped the reference, the meaning, of the sculptures. Yes, at the wish of their teacher, a group of boarders-schoolgirls allows itself to be photographed with me in front of the pornos, but I am the only person whose eyelashes twitch.

The people who erected this temple in the 11th century had clearly wished to leave behind a mark, an impression, of what they had to say, but their point of view has no official standing in the current-day scenario. One can discuss this matter in greater depth, but that is something the country's psychologists, sociologists and historians can do quite adequately.

The selfie is certainly the most popular way to leave a mark. In India, too. Today, almost everyone in India has a mobile phone with which they can portray themselves, their aunts, their little brother and their best friend – with a temple or a statue, a shopping mall or a beach in the background. In addition, there seems to be an urge for portraits in traditional form: a desire for images that are of an formal nature, that are representational, especially as a whole apparatus is involved in their creation. The classical scenery portrait, common in 19th-century photography, still holds allure in India and is, as such, one of the conventional attractions in the fair.

The Boramdeo Temple, located far away from all major settlements in the sparsely populated eastern segment of the state of Chhattisgarh, usually sees very quiet days. At the end of March, however, a festival takes place here called Boramdeo Mahotsav. Nobody has been able to explain to me what it's all about. There is much loud music and dozens of stalls selling clothes and cosmetics, sweetmeats and juices, fried meats and minced meat, horoscopes and hocus-pocus. People flock to the grounds, ringing the bell in the Vishnu temple before settling down to savour the fair's delights.

In the grounds of the fair, various photographers offer their services to the teeming crowds. You can pose grand on a small throne, ride on a wooden elephant, or face the image of a waterfall. The biggest success, however, are four young men who have travelled with an almost life-sized plush tiger and floral arrangements of flowers. A huge number of women and girls can be seen queuing up here. The photographers have also brought along a lighting system and a generator that buzzes next to a well adorned with sculptures of deer. Under a tarpaulin two computers and several printers are set up on tables. While one chap positions, instructs and photographs the objects, two busily edit and print the pictures, while the fourth manages the process and collects the money. The quartet has chosen its location with utmost care. The customers stand in front of a bush hung with a few coloured garlands – a backdrop that exudes a real jungle atmosphere. They are framed by two flower stands and at their feet lies the tiger, docile and gazing somewhat ethereally into the evening sky.

There are indeed tigers in the area. Recently, about 90 were counted in the nearby Kanha National Park. That does not make this production with a large cuddly toy any less weird for me, though. In





छत्तीसगढ़ शासन वन विभाग अधिसूचना क्रमांक वर्ष घोषित किया 2001 कवर्धा वन मंडल कवर्धा वन परिक्षेत्र भोरमदेव अभयारण्य कवर्धा



my view, people should react to such a situation, satirise the spirit of its theatricality, make fun of the artificiality of the situation. But everyone takes the matter bloody seriously and tries to look as good as possible, as dignified as possible: as if they are really princesses with a real, tame tiger lying at their feet. Apparently, these mistresses of the big cat are very aware that they are leaving a trace of themselves at that moment, creating an image even more valid than a selfie – even if only because it is organised by professional photographers and printed out on paper. But, how can it be that the ludicruity of the whole production plays no role here? Is there a po-

wer at work here like the one that allows people to see the pornographic temple reliefs without really seeing them?

We humans are but a fleeting glimmer in the firmament of the great whole. This is the suggestion put forth by the Vedas. I do not wish to judge whether they are right. But there is one thing I know, and that is the fact that we want to soar as a shooting star while raising some dust. That makes things complicated. But it makes them, at least in my view, highly interesting, too.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



PEDESTRIAN PROCESSION

Sunday, 26 March, 2017 – from Chilpi to Raipur (India)

(21.627358, 81.705443)

Honking wildly, the driver has just battled his way through the traffic – as if every second, every centimetre did count. Have the muzzle at the front, at all costs. Now the car is resting in the middle of the road. The engine is off. The driver has his hands in his lap.

All I could see was an old woman crossing the street, and I wondered at the consideration the chauffeur was suddenly displaying. He obviously knew that behind the first woman would follow a second, then a third and a fourth, each at a distance of about two meters. About a hundred women cross the street without talking to each other, silent and dignified.

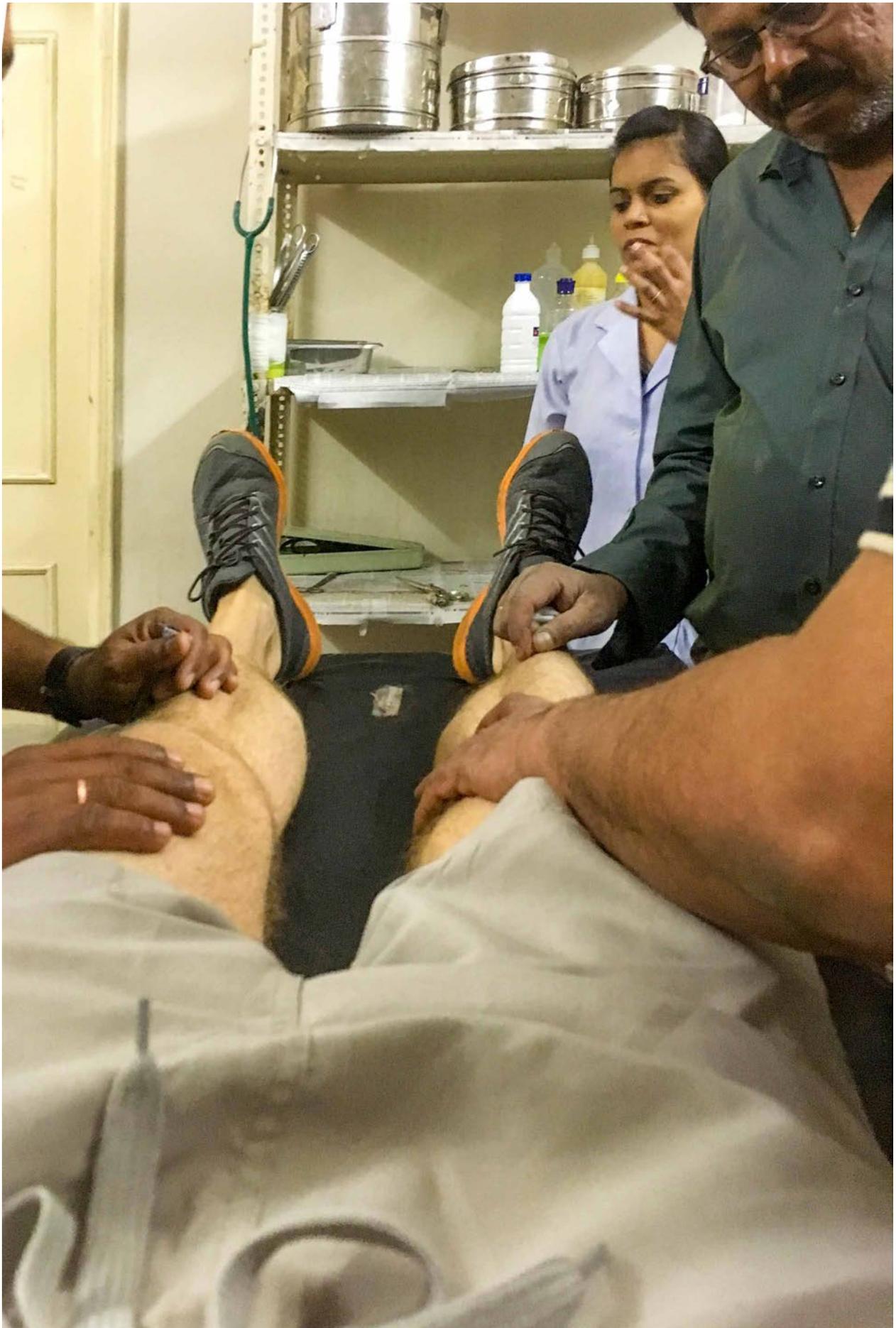
In the countryside, women in India always wear something on their head. These ones are go-

ing without any ballast, though. Only the tenth or twelfth lady in the long procession wears a rectangular metal box with the ashes of the deceased on her head.

I feel a sting in my knee. It reminds me of the bike that had rammed into me four days ago in Raipur on a pedestrian strip. The young biker had shot from the wrong direction out of a one-way street, in the dark, without a headlight. I'd been felled to the ground. The young man had yelled at me as if I'd never learned how to cross a street.

In this country a pedestrian apparently earns respect only after death.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.





THE ELEFANTA-MAN

Tuesday, 28. March, 2017 – Bastar (India) Marketplace

19.207622,81.937292

The market takes place on another day. The state tourism authority in the state capital Raipur, the Internet, the Lonely Planet, the travel agency in the provincial capital Jagdalpur, the hotel porter and the bus driver – were all wrong. The Bastar Haat does not go on stage on a Tuesday, but on another day of the week. The only fellow who has sprung up here today is me: out of my bush of false information, you might say. So I will not see, in the here and now, tattooed tribal folk, adivasis, or «first humans», as India's indigenous people call themselves. I will not be able to buy bell bowls, terracotta figures, gold conical nose plugs, braided cups, or fluorescent saris. I will taste neither the mahua flower nor the liquor that the aborigines burn from it – something they consume, according to twittering townspeo-

ple, right from infancy, women and men both. I will not be able to admire tipsy girls and watch boys tying knives to the claws of their roosters and hurling them into the deadly battle for honour, fame, and a few rupees.

The ten covered podiums on which the goods are displayed on market day are utterly empty. Only a few cows plod through the corridors between them, chomping on anything that looks remotely edible. At Number 7 a bitch, with suckled teats, lies dozing. Her muzzle jerks in her sleep and, every now and again, her legs move as though she is flying in slow motion across a meadow – or over a sausage. Suddenly it seems peculiar to me that even dogs dream. Do they also have an unconscious that manifests in these scenes? A warm wind sends red onion skins scat-



tering over the sandy ground and tears the last leaves off a Bodhi tree. It's time for the monsoon to make its advent and quench the thirst of the earth. From a nearby Gayatri shrine wafts in the chant of a priest, enhanced at moments by the lusty bell-like tone of a young woman. In a pomegranate bush flutters a bird, the clucking of which sounds like a permanent hiccup. The place smells of wood fire and vaguely of cowdung, of dried blood (only, from where does it emanate?) and of concrete in the sun.

A tourist's success depends primarily on whether he is in the right place at the right time: for Thanksgiving in Weizenhausen, at the Cape of the Quiet Sigh during sunset. Timing is of such critical importance that one can even conclude that the places are non-existent beyond these moments. I've been tending to catch the wrong moment lately: like today in Bastar. That actually makes me feel senseless and consequently near-invisible – unseen, in any case. At the same time I imagine that, apart from the right moments, there is a whole other universe for the tourist to discover, a whole parallel realm of false moments. At the moment, I can make believe I am the solitary king of this empire – there is no competitor in sight.

As I sit in the 18th place, wondering what to do next, the pedestal, pillars and roof before my eyes begin to transform into a kind of double-frame that encompasses the life beyond it. Through the space of the squares 2, 3, 14 and 15 I look through an open-on-two-sides box into the world behind it. And, with every passing minute, that reality moves closer into the box, both for my eye and for my feelings. People, animals and vehicles suddenly appear in this box before me – and then vanish. It seems somewhat like television. But my pictures do not come from a distance; rather, I'd speak here of my apparatus of near vision, which takes only a section of my environment into focus.

Much of what defines India's street scene is portrayed before my eyes: Women in shiny saris, bony old women in tattered clothes, office stallions with sagging paunches in steely shirts, young beauties in jeans and kurta, teenagers with over-developed biceps and skinny legs, trucks, buses, bullock carts, tractors, bicycles and mobile stalls. On one motorcycle are perched four best friends, on the next a small family with three children and a dog, the third is ferrying a whole bedstead, and on the luggage carrier of the fourth, hanging head-first



and arranged like a parade, are two dozen white chickens, alive, technically, at any rate.

«Over time, I realised I'd travel best if I did not move faster than a dog trudges.» This is what Gardner McKay writes in *Journey without a Map*. But the one who is trudging, is he not already traveling too fast? Isn't standing still the essence of traveling? He certainly makes the use of near vision possible. And he conveys, faster definitely than any other dynamic, a sense of the great realm of wrong moments.

Stopping is however the antithesis of travel, and so I vacate Seat No. 18 at some point and stroll back to the bus stop. On the way, I watch the fierce fight between a crow and a chicken for a slice of watermelon. Some things you see only rarely.

In front of the chai stall, which is also a bus stand, a woman with thick, horn-rimmed glasses speaks to me in the best of English and wants to know what I'm looking for in her village. I seize the chance to complain that I've traveled to Bastar for no reason, as there's a lot of misinformation circulating around here. Instead of compassion or understanding, I'm met with loud laughter. When she was a child, there was an adivasi who had almost always turned up in the market on the wrong

day. If she remembered correctly, he had belonged to the Dhuruva tribe and led the life of a loner. Alone, the man had sat under a tree, with small leaf-cups in front of him with chapura, ants chutney, in them. Since his chutney was top class, people were happy to buy it even on the wrong day: «When everything was gone, the man in the village shop bought a large bottle of Fanta and disappeared back into the bush. That's why we kids liked to call him the Elefanta-Man. In the last few years, however, I have never seen him.»

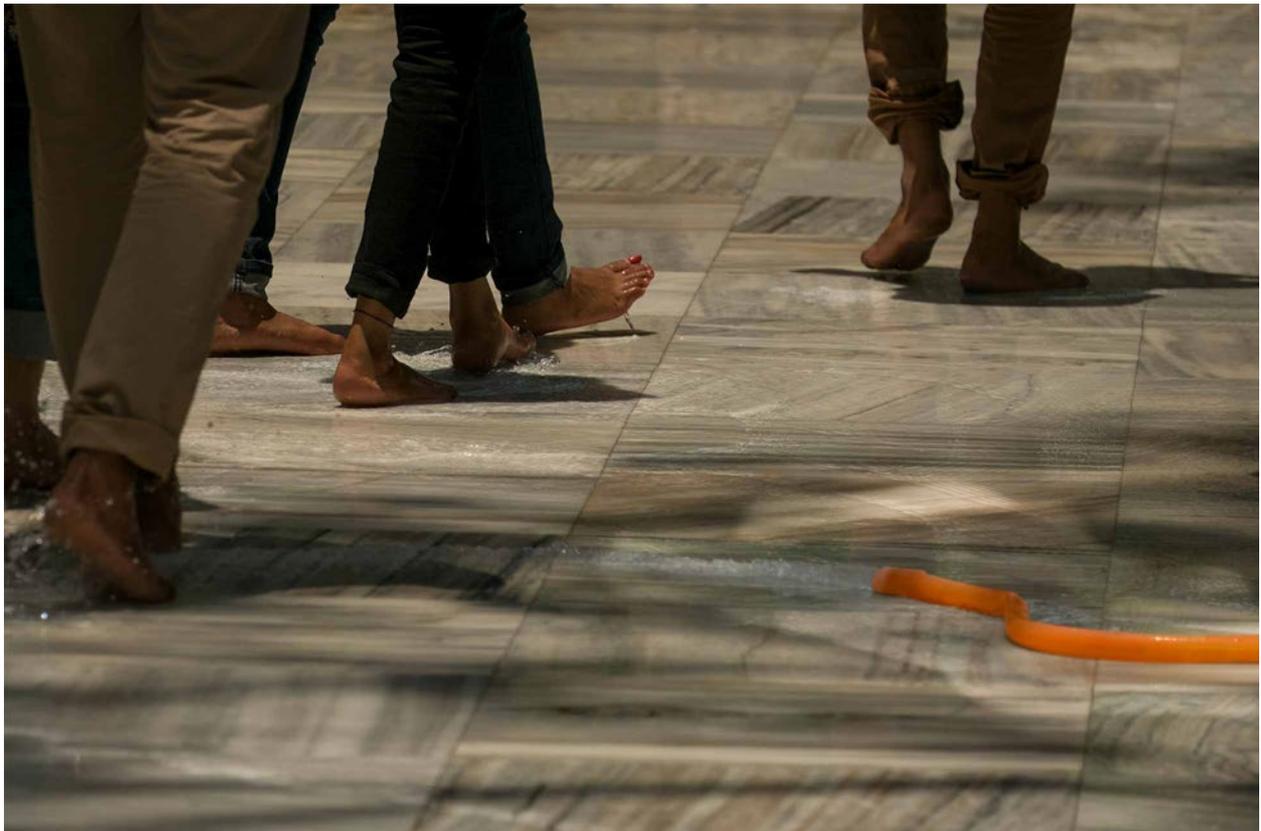
The bus comes and we get in. We're rolling when I have a change of heart and jump out back onto the road. A sharp knee pain reminds me of the collision with a motorcycle I'd had in Raipur three days earlier. But I recover quickly. The bus trundles off with a hiss. I walk to the nearest store, buy a 2-litre bottle of Fanta and run back to the market. In the last row of podiums, between No. 79 and No. 80, there is a place that does not carry a number because a thick Bodhi tree stands in front of it. At this spot I open the bottle, stand in front of it for perhaps three minutes, then bow slightly, and walk back to the main street.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.









HOSING DOWN THE GODS

Thursday, May 18, 2017 – Bodhgaya (India) Mahabodhi Temple

24.696039,84.991224

Why on earth does the wrong thing seize me always? Here I am, standing at the fulcrum of the Buddhist world, the very place at which Prince Siddhartha gained enlightenment – 600 years before Jesus Christ opened his eyes in Bethlehem. Above me soar the branches of the descendant of a mighty peepal tree under which Gautama meditated till he attained Bodhi, until lust and anger fell away from him and he became the Buddha: «Awakened». At my feet, a stone platform marks the place Siddhartha had sat on that eventful full moon night. The stone is called Vajrasana, «Diamond Throne», and for Buddhists it is akin to the valve of the cosmic rubber boat. When the universe is completely destroyed, when air escapes from everything, Vajrasana will also disappear. And when the cosmos revives, that platform

will be the first thing that will emerge from nothingness.

A myriad pilgrims dressed in brown, orange and yellow robes surround me. Placing their hands and foreheads against the stone they sit there with their eyes closed in silent reflection. Behind one of the many stupas that encircle the central temple, a monk prostrates over and over again, for half an hour, an hour, two hours. A young German woman wearing a t-shirt with the words, «I am Paleo», dissolves into tears, and is gently seated on a stone by her boyfriend, and provided with paper tissues and a Mars bar.

What the Kaaba in Mecca is to Muslims, the Mahabodhi temple of Bodhgaya is to Buddhists. And every country in which Buddhism plays an important role has erected shrines and monasteries



in its unique local architectural style here. The Indosan Nipponji Temple is a restful retreat even in the enduring Indian excitement, the Thai temple bears a regal golden roof and the Bhutanese temple a resplendent interior, and the Tibetan Tergar Monastery looks like an elegant palazzo on the outside but feels more like a tent inside. About twenty more countries are present in Bodhgaya with their temples, and every street is imbued with reverent solemnity.

What peace these structures radiate. They promise a gentle falling asleep as well as a waking up that can be something other than a nightmare. Would there be a better place in which to be changed, transformed? Hardly. I'm also taken. But the wrong thing grabs my attention. I stand there like a little boy and am transfixed by the sight of a man spraying water with a hose on the statues on the temple facade as if they were terribly hot. A hose knows no respect, this is not god washing, you cannot cleanse with awe.

On the temple's northern flank a series of 19 stone lotuses soar out of an elongated platform. They mark the path along which the Buddha is said to have practised a long walking meditation after his Awakening. At the moment, the summer

sun is beating down so ruthlessly on the floor that the marble slabs are turning into glowing hot stones on which you could well roast rotis. In order to cool down the floor for barefoot pilgrims, the caretaker has laid down a hosepipe, which suddenly criss-crosses the area, acting like a little dragon. Buddha's Jewel Path (Chankramanar) becomes a slapstick catwalk where pilgrims prance like goats to avoid the wet bite of the garden hose snake. I can go on and on watching them – at least as long as the monk prostrates between the stupas.

I am unashamed that I'm preoccupied with such trivialities here. I have become friends with the fact that I always get stuck in the episodic. But I am a bit dissatisfied, dissatisfied with myself (I have forbidden myself to reproach the world). Because wouldn't this be the place to open up a bit to more important principles, at least to «smell the big», as my mother would have said. An old man limps towards me, lifts his shirt, shows me his emaciated belly, in which his breath seems to rage like a tornado, reaches out and silently takes my small note. Certainly, begging is forbidden in the temple precincts, but at a certain age perhaps everything is permissible. In a fairytale, the skinny old man would actual-





ly be a magician. Out of compassion, he would don his true form and give me a deeper insight into the secrets of the world. But Bodhgaya is not fairyland, for me definitely not. Or is it that my rupee is just too small? Certainly, mercy also has its price.

I allow my gaze to wander through the garden and discover two Japanese women in red robes, sitting in meditative repose under a Flame of the Forest tree with bright orange flower tufts. The women keep their eyes partially closed and slowly let small prayer-beads slide through their fingers. Delicate rays of light streak through the branches and sketch points on their garments, which flutter slightly when a breeze whispers through the crowns. Again, it crosses my mind that this would be the place... Repetition is an important aspect of

Buddhist practice. But that is certainly not meant as a mantra in conjunctive.

Behind me, a man-sized stupa shines in the midday light. I sit down for a moment to photograph it in the direct sunlight. Returning to the shade of the Bodhi tree, I wonder why I've chosen this stupa from among the countless monuments in this garden. I take a closer look at the picture and notice a small weed that disturbs the strict order of the figures. Again I've searched again for the episodic, and again it has found me. Once again I have reached for something, and once again I've missed it. I will attain no deeper insight at this point. But I confuse though, what I do and what happens to me. At least that.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaran.



WHAT THE PICTURES MEAN

Monday, May 15, 2017 – Ranchi (India) Lake Road

23.366228,85.319651

«Take it! It's ninety per cent water.» The old man grasps my hand. His fingers feel dry and warm – not hot, sweaty and sticky as those of the many young men I had shaken hands with while on my journey. He presses my ankles lightly, then reaches up for my elbow, pulling me a little closer to him. He smells dry and earthy, like turmeric and iron.

Ranchi lies roughly 700 metres above sea level and the city is known for being cooler and less humid than the surrounding plains. It was therefore a popular destination for people from nearby cities, and the British had used it as their summer residence when they had held sway over the region. In recent years, though, a lot of the forest that had once provided coolth to the area has been savaged by the iron and coal indust-

ry-life in the city. Today, the temperature is an oppressive 44 °C. Ah well, I've trudged these steps up to Lake Ranchi in the hope that it will soothe me with the touch of wind on my skin. And, yes, now and then a slight breeze creeps across the surface of the lake – just sufficient to raise the bodily hope that there will be different days again.

The old man presses a cucumber into my hand, while simultaneously offering me another whose tip he has already bitten off. «It's good! It's healthy! That's a gift!» he laughs, and then grimaces as if he's trying to sprinkle something ironic over his words. I sense that I do not need to distrust him. He had joined me at the market exit, where mangoes, watermelons, garlic and onions are being sold at the moment. Side by side, we had walked to the





lake and he'd asked me neither for my name nor from where I hailed.

Lake Ranchi is a pond, actually; its shores are overgrown with greasy water hyacinths smothered by garbage. There are even a few damaged deities sticking out of the mud; close to my feet an icon of Ganesha lies waving with his trunk. Disused icons are usually «exposed» by the wayside – gods cannot be thrown into the garbage can, after all, nor can they be recycled.

«This is not a lake,» my companion rumbles. «It's not pretty, all this dirt. Paradise looks different.» He poses in front of the water like a music conductor, spreads his arms, shakes his head and drops his arms again – as if the orchestra is not ready yet for his command.

Is my home my paradise, the gent wants to know abruptly.

«Not really,» I say evasively.

Well, he would like to show me his paradise, he tells me, and pulls out of his trouser pocket a thick wedge of banknotes, papers and plastic covers, their edges and corners scuffed by his thigh movements in waking life.

Does he wish to show me a banknote, the idea flits through my head. Or perhaps now comes a

trick. Instead, he picks out a folded newspaper page from the bundle and unfolds it carefully. At the fold, the paper is badly torn, the sheet barely stays together. He unfolds the page holds it up before his chest so that I can admire it in all its beauty. That, he says with a beam, is «paradise», his paradise.

The newspaper page is from the Real Estate section of the *Times of India*; it shows pictures of a park with tidy lawns, ponds, footbridges, a fountain. In one photograph a pretty European-looking beauty poses on the edge of a crystal clear pond. She is wearing an ivory-coloured robe, has taken off her sandals and is merrily splashing water into the air with her pale feet. «Grab our golden offer, hurry!» reads the bold print between the photographs. It's an advertisement for a luxury housing complex, where the price of a house starts at 49 lakh rupees, which is equivalent to about 80,000 francs.

That's really nice, I venture bravely. He turns the page over carefully, the display also covers the entire back, partly with the same pictures.

«Would you like to live there?» I ask.

He rolls his eyes: «Of course!»

«And where is it, your paradise?»



Irritated, he looks at me, shakes his head, frowns.

«Well, these are houses, where are they?»

He has never asked himself that, he replies, and grins, rather bashfully, it seems to me. Perhaps he cannot read? Have I put him into an awkward situation now? Or myself? But all he does is squint his eyes and quickly turn the page: «Flower Valley!» He shrugs his shoulders; it does not seem to mean anything to him. «Ah, there, Gurgaon. It's near

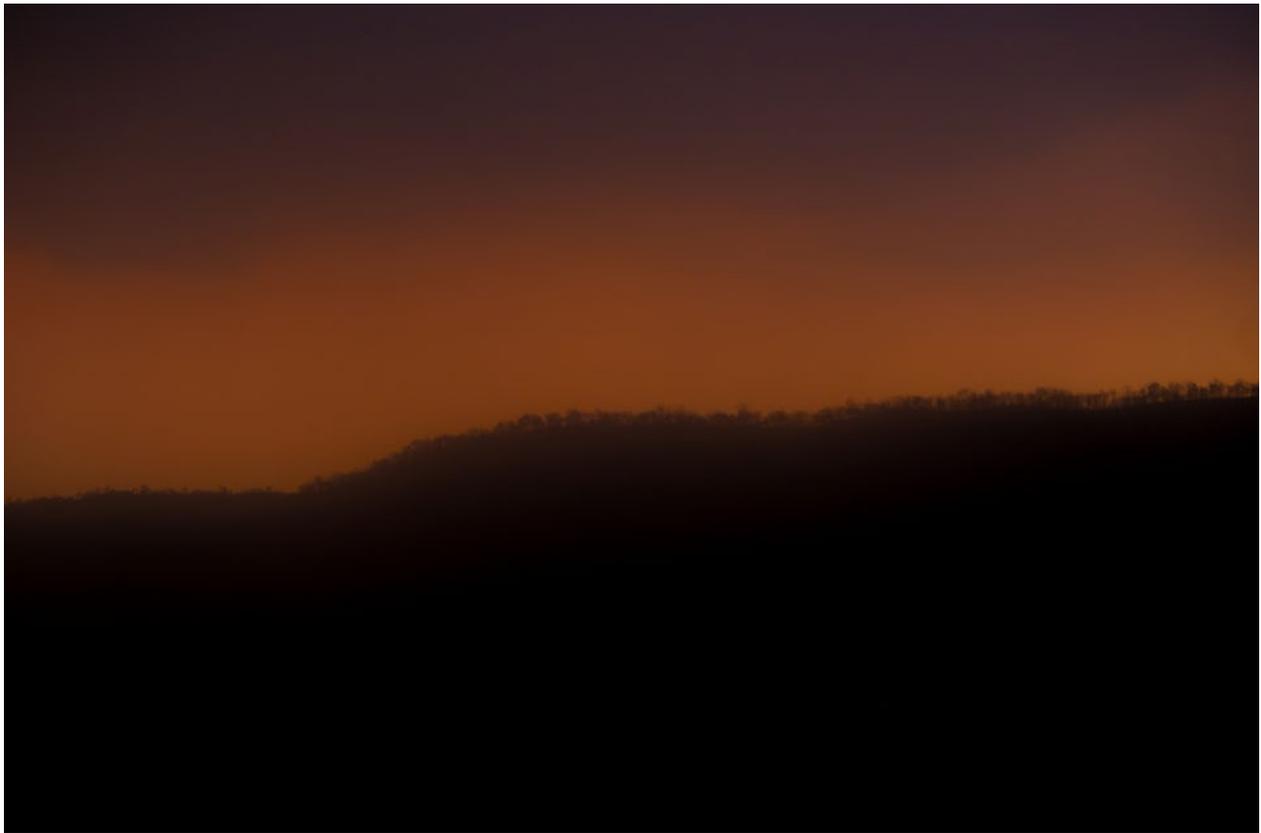
Delhi.» Another shrug. The question about where his paradise lies seems irrelevant to him.

When I know what a piece of photography wishes to portray, and to which place on this planet I can connect it, it changes my relationship to the image considerably – regardless of whether or not the connection holds any truth. To the old man this seems to be all the same. I help him fold his paradise back to pocket size, take my cucumber, and thank him.

Two hours later, I'm in the throes photographing a small, golden equestrian statue in a street corner – despite the bad light. According to my city map, it's a dargah, the memorial to a Muslim saint named Shamesh Nawajwan. Only on the third or fourth click, do I realise that I have the paradise man also in the picture. He is standing by the shrine and chatting with his acquaintances. He sees me and jumps up as if electrified. «Shamesh, Shamesh, Shamesh,» he sings, clapping his hands rhythmically and dancing across the street: «This is my saint, this is my boss.»

Passers-by stop and watch the little drama. He grabs me by the arm and pulls me a few steps back and forth. I brace myself and we stumble, staggering for a few seconds like two drunks, across the street. «Photo! You have to take a photo!» he exclaims, skilfully scaling the holy rider's pedestal and posing with a big grin next to the horse. «Is that your key to paradise,» the question slips out of my lips. But he does not understand what I mean.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



VIBRATING ZONES

Wednesday, May 17, 2017 – from Ranchi to Gaya (India)

(24.146150,85.898743)

At the end of a day of unspeakable heat that turns every bodily move into a pain, every flicker of the mind into a show of strength, lightning flashes through the evening sky. Thunder and light explosions boom over our Indian Railways Passenger, moving at walking pace through northern Jharkhand, attacking the train windows, prompting children to turn wide-eyed with alarm as they press deeper into their mother's lap.

The rain lashes against the wheels. Outside, grey paddy rice fields, which provide people with their main food here, glide past. Every now and then the black top of a coal mine's shaft tower is distinguishable from the the red light of its bottomline. These passing showers are the harbingers of the great monsoon that will soon

bring the country some coolth and much needed water.

Suddenly a hill looms into the scene: at its hem dry trees, and the veils of the tropical storm, and the fading glow of the day combine to create those deeply vibrating zones that cast a spell also over Rothko's paintings – such as No. 14, for instance, which was created shortly before my birth. They are pulsating little cracks, openings in the visible world through which the tingles of a higher reality skim my mind. Of course I do not believe in it. Yet, it does not leave me cold.

The original text in German has first been published in *Kunstbulletin* 7-8/2017, p. 176.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.





CROSS HITS

Friday, March 31, 2017 – from Bhubaneswar to Puri (India)

(20.027485,85.822286)

By my side in the shared taxi from Bhubaneswar to Puri is a woman who calls on her mobile phone for two hours without interruption. Only when we drive past an important temple does she momentarily lay the device in her lap before bringing her right hand to her chest and then to her forehead. I am squeezed in between her and a businessman filling out one form after another on his briefcase. The man pushes his suitcase against my ribs from my left and her body lies soft and warm on my right side. I cannot make myself any thinner.

If I turn my head fully towards her it would be an intrusion into her private space. I perceive her gesture only from the corner of my eye, but I'm certain she's going to cross herself in front of every temple – with that strangely erratic movement that reminds

me of an elephant spraying water from a pond over its back with its trunk. Only, why should she make the sign of the cross? Because she is a Christian maybe? But then, why should she react to Hindu temples? The cross would look appropriate in her hands, in any case, I think, feeling satisfied – just as one feels about taking a little revenge. I like to take revenge on people who do not give me more space. It is the way of the coward, actually: to fight for space would undoubtedly be more difficult.

The journey ends, but her voice reverberates in my head for a long while and that night I dream of her fingernails: they creep like pink cockroaches towards me on the table from a bowl of steaming rice.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.





A DEAD JUMPING JACK

Monday, April 3, 2017 – from Jagannath Temple to Puri Bus Stand (India)

(19.812706,85.829183)

Outside the Jagannath temple I climb into a cycle-rickshaw and ride down the Grand Road to the bus station. The passenger's perch is high in such a rickshaw, clearly above the bustle of the street. The driver doesn't require to huff too hard because the road goes a bit down-hill. So, we glide rather elegantly past the beggars waiting there in rows for alms. The *Prasad* traders around have put up umbrellas to protect their little sugar factories and their oozing pastries from the sun. At the food stalls, the people crowd into the shade with small plastic bowls with yellowish lentils and pani-puri in their hands. The pigment merchant, however, sits untouched in the sun, surrounded by cans and bags of the magenta-coloured paint used in various temple ceremonies. Everything about

the seller is coloured by the red powder, including his white robe, his gray hair, his skin, and his fingernails. Suddenly, I hear the sound of a drum, a swift-throbbing beat as if something is being driven. From a side street, two dozen men turn into Grand Road. They are on a fast trot, carrying a stretcher bearing a male corpse over their heads. His dead body is covered with flowers, his face and hair are dusted with red powder. At eye level the dead man rushes past me. His head bounces back and forth, with tiny clouds of red haze constantly rising from it. I associate with death the rigid, the immovable. This one seems like a jumping jack in Orcus, though.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balam.





THE ISLAND OF THE BLISSFUL

Thursday, April 6, 2017 – Guja Pahar (India)

21.603607,83.899086

Some ideas swell up in my head into such beautiful wraps that I have to almost forcibly inject them with a dose of reality – even though I know that reality is invariably a hammer-blow that flattens fantasies fashioned by the finest chiselling tool.

The cow does not fare well in India, especially in the cities. Often, one sights a cow standing apathetically at a crossroads, with the hoot of traffic in its ears, a cocktail of exhaust gases in its nose, metal dust in its pelt, plastic waste on its tongue. Or lying in a bed of rubbish, fragile and rickety, with leg injuries, rashes on its skin, and patiently chewing on a red-and-blue cardboard box that once carried a Domino's pizza around the world. You don't require to be a cow whisperer to guess how damaged the body and psyche of these animals must be.

No one has as yet been able to explain to me why these cattle are in the cities and are subjected to such torment. Should these cows remind us that India is basically an agrarian society? Do people want to express the spirituality of the country? Are they there to calm traffic? Or is it that people can improve their karma by feeding some kitchen waste to the poor cows?

Even in the countryside domestic cattle have it hard, especially where they are used as workhorses. Well, they are safe from the butcher's knife in most places because a devout Hindu does not slaughter a cow. *Bos taurus* is *Aghnya* in Sanskrit: «the inviolable». But, alas, this does not mean that the animal cannot be thrashed: In no other country have I seen so much anger unleashed on the backs of cattle as I have in India. In a fairytale forest in



the heart of Odisha, I witnessed a scene that still brings tears to my eyes when I recall it. A farmer was driving a pair of bulls through the village, with a yoke and a drawbar but without a cart or a plow. The bulls got tangled in some rubbish, panicked, and started running randomly through the street. The farmer, a haggard boy, started to yell and hit one cow on its back with a big stick. This traumatised the bovine pair further, and the two bulls hit a mound and got stuck. The boy kept beating one animal till it collapsed on the ground, with all four legs extended backwards and its jaw lying flat on the earth. I got the feeling it was not just dead, but that it had died of fear. But the farmers standing around simply laughed.

And then I heard about this island which is believed to have been formed when the waters rushed out north of the Hirakud dam near Sambalpur. The local farmers, who were desperately struggling to salvage their household goods from the flood zone at the time, simply left their animals behind on a hill. The hill turned into an island and the cows were left to their fate. Instead of perishing, as strays and abandoned pets often do, they proceeded to do magnificently well, multiplying joyfully and gaining in strength. They became larger, developed more powerful horns and a strong white coat. They also learned to move through the forest swiftly and skilfully. After a while, the farmers tried to recapture the feral animals, but the cattle deftly avoided them. The story of this Cattle Island is told in every guidebook that describes the attractions in the province of Sambalpur and the place is called a «natural wonder». The idea of huge cows brimming with health and moving through the woods at lightning speed is fascinating, especially when one thinks of the dreary image of the city cow. Anyone who has ever seen cattle being released into the meadows for the first time after a long winter in the barn, knows what joy these animals can exude.

I knew at once that I had to see this island of blissful cows. And so I took the train from the capital Bhubaneswar to Sambalpur – the journey takes six hours – and I arrived shortly before midnight. The next day I sat in two dark offices of the Tourism Board; later I spoke to officers in the Town Hall; then I consulted three officials of the dam authority and finally got myself the blessings of the

police. Everyone knew about Cattle Island, but no-one had ever visited the island. Nobody could tell me how to get there. But everyone agreed that it would be best to try by boat from a place called Tilia, with the help of local fishermen.

At first I hired the services of a taxi driver who, as soon as he realised where we were headed, abruptly brought me back to Sambalpur. The second expressed his willingness to drive me, but after about fifteen minutes he received a phone call that forced him to turn back for reasons unknown to me. Only the third fellow actually ferried me out of the city – in a taxi protected by Sai Baba, whose benign face was stuck over the speedometer, and a flying Hanuman dangling from the rear-view mirror. It was evening soon and we honked through the golden light past heavily laden trucks, coal mines, steel mills, and nuclear reactors to Belpahar, where we spent the night. The next morning we set out early, driving a long time through sparse forests, past rice fields and coal fields, crossing countless little hamlets before we finally reached Tilia, which lay on the bank of the reservoir but some kilometres away from the water. There were no fishermen there. And nobody knew how to get to Cattle Island.

My driver considered his mission accomplished and wanted to promptly return to Sambalpur. But I stuck to my guns; finally we agreed that he should drive me at least to the dyke behind Tilia, from where I'd be able to see the island up close. We drove over roads that were getting tighter and tighter. Then over ragged country lanes that became increasingly potholed and slopey. Finally, over rugged slopes that differed less and less from the surrounding landscape. At last we reached a temple complex called Guja Pahar, and headed for the shore of the lake, where a few mighty boulders prevented any further journeying.

And now I'm sitting there in the shade of a large shrub with dangling brown pods somewhat reminiscent of tamarind. My driver has parked the car about 500 metres away, under a mighty tree, and is waiting impatiently for me to return. Dogs had followed us on the last kilometre, peacefully, without barking, probably out of sheer boredom. Goats joined them a bit later and together they trotted after us in the dust. Now the animals are standing or lying around the car, which is hot and



belching petrol fumes. I have left my equipment on the back seat in a bid to assure the nervous driver that I will return shortly. He had made it clear to me that, for him, the only possible continuation of this expedition would be the return to Sambalpur.

Well, I cannot get any closer to the Island of Happy Cows. A few metres away from my perch is a boat parked on the beach, and for a bold moment I consider hijacking it and rowing across to the island. But I lack the derring-do for such an adventure – and, what’s more, the boat probably has no paddles. Above the barge, a low-slung headland floats into the picture and, right behind it, my island rises into the sky, surrounded by a light haze. I’m too far away to see the details. I have sacrificed nearly a hundred hours and a few thousand rupees to see this island. Now, it’s right in front of me, but the cows that are meant to be lustily romping through its bushy terrain are no more real than they were four days earlier.

As I’m preparing to get up and leave and release my chauffeur from his zoo, a peculiar couple shows up before me: a girl of about ten leading an old man by the hand over the narrow path leading from the beach to my seat. The old man could well be about 100 years old – although I must

admit that I always consider all withered old people in India to be centenarians. The elder’s lanky body is wrapped in white shawls and his forehead draped with a saffron-coloured scarf. With his right hand he holds up a black umbrella that protects the two from the sun. His snow-white beard flutters in the wind, his lips are tightly pressed together, and his eyes move up and down rapidly: it seems he is blind. The girl wears tracksuit trousers, a pink Snow White T-shirt and a pair of headphones that she removes carefully from her ears when she spots me.

«You’re here to see the cows, aren’t you?» She says in effortless English, plucking at the old man’s arm, making him halt in his stride.

«Is that Cow Island?» I ask, pointing to the island on the horizon.

«Yes. My grandfather used to fish off the coast of that island every day.»

»And did he see the cows?»

«Sure!»

«How old are you?»

The girl turns to the old man, whose lips have widened into a smile. He chuckles and starts to speak very fast, in a melodious, slightly feminine voice. At the same time he sways his hips back and



forth, swings the umbrella with one hand, gesticulates with the other and shrugs his shoulders repeatedly. He appears to me like a pantomime artiste – only the eyes that he now has closed do not fit the role.

«There were many cows, many hundreds of them,» his granddaughter translates solemnly. «They travelled in herds, often scurrying through the forest like ghosts. Sometimes they came ashore to drink and bathe. Did you know that cows are good swimmers? After bathing in the water, they would roll in the grass on the banks, and often lie down with all four legs in the air. Have you ever seen cows lying like that, like dogs? Sometimes they would laze there for a long time, warming their wet bellies in the sun. Sometimes they would also perform real dances.»

The old man closes the umbrella, clamps it under his arm like a horn and starts to rotate around his own axis with small steps: once, twice, thrice. Then he stops and opens the umbrella again.

«If I put out my nets early in the morning, when it was still dark,» the granddaughter continues telling his story, «then all I could hear was their voices and I felt as if they were shouting something to me. Sometimes I would come back ashore, but

even as I approached the shore, the cows would disappear into the forest.»

«And you? Have you seen the cows?» I want to know from the girl.

«No, I was very small when they suddenly vanished. Grandfather says there was either an epidemic or they were finished by predators. Nobody knows for certain because nobody dared visit the island. But from the day the cows disappeared, grandpa was unable to catch any fish off the island. And soon after that day his eyes started to go.»

Are there cows on the island even today, I want to know. The girl shakes her head: «No, but who knows, maybe they just became invisible. Do you have a candy for me?»

I hand her my pen. She shrugs, reaches for her grandfather's hand, and pulls him away.

I go quickly to the car to fetch my camera. But when I get back the two are already too far away. I take a few pictures of the landscape. Oddly enough, the island looks even farther away through my telephoto lens than it did to my naked eyes.

My driver is visibly relieved when we finally commence on the return journey. He honks merrily through the afternoon traffic back in the direction of Sambalpur. Without braking he opens the car



door a bit every now and then and spits a vivid orange beam of betel juice onto the street. Hypnotised by the image of Super Hanuman dangling from the rear-view mirror, I sink into a short sleep on the back seat. I dream of a cow that is lying with all four legs in the air, only it's dead and bloated. Suddenly a monkey with a blood-red face slips out of the cow's stomach. He grins at me, purses his lips to make a loud farting sound, and jumps away. Gasp-

ing for air, I wake up. Some stories just do not end well. I really should have made it to this island. Or, I should have simply stayed content with the idea of it. But now, in a way I do not comprehend correctly, something dark and discomfoting has come to mar the image of the island. But, who knows, perhaps that's simply the dynamics of the blissful.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



HE PURSHES HIS MOUTH ANS SAYS «OM»

Saturday, January 20, 2018 – Guwahati (India) MG Road, Circuit House

26.191501,91.749620

What will he tell his wife in the evening, I wonder as I visualise him hopping in his white tennis socks over a faded Persian rug after returning from work. In the background the TV is running. He rubs his nose with his thumb and forefinger and then opens two buttons of his crimson shirt that stretches taut over his paunch. «I met a foreigner today,» he might tell her. Or: «You know, these foreigners are really astonishing, not even once have they...» Or: «You know, my love, I did something good today.»

«I'm a police officer,» the man introduces himself, friendliness writ large on his face.

«Are you conducting an investigation?» I ask, feeling slightly amused. «No, I want to talk to you, follow me!»

Since the officer's commanding words offer no gap into which I can thrust my words of protest or refusal, I follow him, feeling puzzled. We walk across the street into a park that evidently belongs to the Court, pass by a golden statue of Mahatma Gandhi, and walk through a passage between two colonial buildings to the river.

I'm now sitting out on perhaps the most spectacular terrace in Guwahati. My gaze travels through the elegant railings to out beyond the mist-covered Brahmaputra, the island with the Umananda temple, and the islet Uravashi with the ruins of a lighthouse bequeathed by the British. The police officer has a green writing pad on his knees and is busily drawing a diagram of the universe, which he divides into positive and negative energies, visible and invisible, material and spiritual.



The diagram is part of a larger presentation, the core message of which is to demonstrate the superiority of Indian culture over Western culture. In his homeland the police officer sees a spiritual culture, in mine (America) a purely materialistic one. The Indian body is a diamond. «My body is a diamond!» he declares, stroking his chest. But the western body is cold and useless and therefore needs be artificially covered with diamonds: that's the philosophy of the West. In India, the focus is on biological nature, he explains, while in the West it is on technology. Alas, the artificial culture of the rich West today poses a threat to the natural culture of its destitute homeland; yet it is plants that produce oxygen, and not robots. NASA has recent-

ly discovered that there are sounds in the universe, while India has known this for thousands of years. I look at him questioningly. He purses his mouth and says «Om». Towards the end of the lecture he complains that a criminal spirit (he speaks of *mens rea*) has now been imposed on innocent India from outside. I ask him whom he has in mind. He looks at me with expectant eyes. «Well, the West, maybe,» I venture boldly, and he promptly digresses to talk about just how important it is for a policeman to read the truth in faces: «Body language, you understand!»

I understand – and then the lesson is over. Now I have to give him my name and phone number. He does not want to tell me his name; after all, he is a police officer. He also does not want me to take a picture of the diagram because I have everything in my head now. I am not allowed to make a portrait of him, either. However, as the gentleman wants a selfie with me, he cannot refuse to extend me the same courtesy. So we go into one of the offices and one of the servitors takes our photos with our smartphones with trembling hands after making a thousand salaams. In order not to be rude, I make myself look a little smaller. But knowing how bad a double-chin looks on me, I raise my head slightly. «I support biological culture,» the police officer repeats his key message to me – and then I am dismissed.

On the way to the gate I look at the photograph and find that I look hunched, crumpled, bemused and at the same time peculiarly arrogant – and that the blue waters of a pretty brook, portrayed in a poster behind me, are flowing directly into my ear. I do not know what the chief tells his wife in the evening. But this, in a nutshell, is my version of the story.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaran.



THE CHAMBER OF PIGGY WONDERS

Thursday, January 18, 2018 – Shillong (India) Bara Bazaar

25.577127,91.877116

He does everything differently. His colleagues sitting on either side of him have the innards of the pig lying before them in one big fold – still connected like they had been when they had served the animal during its lifetime. When a customer asks for a particular organ, the butcher shoves his hand deep into the innards, groping around and searching, shaking off the bloody loops before pulling out the kidney, or the liver, or lungs, or the heart. He picks up the piece he has retrieved, looks questioningly at the customer, who nods. A sharp knife then slices off what the client wants from the unwanted, and the remainder plops like a drowsy blood bag back into its original position.

But the butcher in front of whose stall I stand and gawk, evidently loves the overview. The bowels, the ears, the front half of the head, the knuckles, the nose, the belly fat, the gastric sac, the diaphragm,

and not least *Doh snam*, the divine sausages of blood and pork fat which the Khasi people love so much, are neatly pinned next to each other on the sheet-metal wall of his little stall. I imagine that the master wants to explain to his customers the exact use that the particular body portion had been the pig, or how to deal with the piece properly in the kitchen. I am reminded of the didactic panels that had once been common in schools – and also of the images of the chambers of curiosities. Also, of course, about the saying about the pig, in which everything is supposed to be good. The sight of such a beautiful exhibition makes you gladly believe that there must be something true in that, after all.

The original text in German has first been published in *Kunstbulletin* 3/2018, p. 160.
Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.





THE INVENTION OF HONEY

Saturday, January 13, 2018 – Aizawl (India) MG Road

23.7275071,92.7184111

The great thing about a tourist is that his gaze unveils the extraordinariness couched in the flat everyday life of a place. Occasionally, this gaze discovers or conjures up things that will afterwards sweeten the lives of «the locals», as they are more prettily and pithily called in English. A good tourist, if one is permitted to be idealistic, should consciously cultivate, refine, nurture, if need be protect and, above all, communicate. So that his presence takes on a meaning that goes beyond the economic aspect. The tourist definitely has a more realistic perspective on many facts – because life is extraordinary even when it seems to be the blooming same every day.

Tourists often marvel at many things that locals hardly bother with. In Aizawl this could, for instance, be the women trotting with small steps

briskly through the streets, bearing heavily laden baskets on their backs, held up by ribbons tied over the top of their heads. Or it could be the weird innards that butchers present with obvious pride to customers like me, as if they were lucky charms displayed in an alluring array, without being able to identify the organ. It could also be the young couples strolling hand-in-hand through the streets of Aizawl – something that would be unthinkable in other parts of India. And, oh yes, for the pedestrian unused to the torment imposed on him by the mindless drivers on India's roads, the very fact that nobody here blows the horn mindlessly is unbelievable. Then there are the mounds of luminous oranges, the lovely sarongs of some of the women, the jewel-like gloss of their hair, the contented eyes of babies being carried around in towels and, not



least, the pranks of the legendary Chhura. This little list is but a start; it can be significantly refined, lengthened.

The formal relationship between tourists and residents changes when something appears that is obviously unusual also for locals, such as a seller of wild honey. He has positioned himself on the fringe of MG Road, which meanders along the crests of the hills across which Aizawl spreads. Across the street from him is the stadium that belongs to the barracks of the Assam Rifles, a modern castle over the houses of the elite. He's a small fellow, squatting, he's no taller than the metal cauldron by his side, laden with a mixture of honey and dead bees. The honeycombs lying on a bed of leaves in front of him appear to be notably more powerful – a metre-long plank of wax. One wonders how he has managed to ferry the huge cauldron to the place, because there is not even a handcart near him. He must undoubtedly have accomplices.

The honeycombs are not for sale, he is quick to clarify, they are merely the poster model for the honey that he has bottled in disused drinks bottles and distributes at 300 rupees a bottle, a grand price. Rather absurd that he has brought all these

huge honeycombs along just in order to sell some honey. But, come to think of it, he is doing nothing other than what big departmental stores in Europe do – which is to make gigantic productions simply in order to draw attention to the occasional vanishing little item which they want to push. And the trick works: people stop to stand and stare, to wonder, dipping their fingers in the honey pot and tasting the sweet goo, questioning the seller, negotiating and ultimately carrying away, with a beam of satisfaction, a bottle of the sticky stuff.

I, too, buy a sip of honey. Whether the little man really comes from the forest, as he claims, I cannot ascertain. Wild honey could well look like this: a floating mush dotted with all manner of dark foreign bodies, parts of bees, bits of honeycomb, particles of wood. The honey tastes incredibly fresh but has, at the same time, an almost artificial fruit aroma, like that of the bon bon children love. While I taste it, I wonder what it means when I experience something as a tourist that is equally special for the locals. The special is actually the arch-enemy of the typical, which one has to enoble or honour as a tourist. When I encounter the atypical, do I move away from my tourist's perspective? Do I swing in sync with the locals for a





moment? Does the honey-pot show that the differences between the visitor and the inhabitant, which sometimes seem larger than life, essentially hardly exist – or, at the least, are just functional, provided both sides limit themselves to their roles. The shift of views brought about by the insect-trap on the roadside suddenly raises questions over questions – quite in the manner of bees swarming out in search of nectar on a sweet summer day.

I now remember a story that Ovid tells in his *Fasti*. Bacchus travels with his followers through a strange mountain, the Maenads sing, the satyrs

happily beat their chintels. The metallic sound of their instruments attracts bees, which Ovid describes as «birds with wings made out of air» (a description that exists perhaps only in my translation). Bacchus captures the creatures and locks them in a hollow tree-stump and, soon after, he has invented honey – which has since stuck firmly to Greece’s culinary reputation. Is there any further proof required to show that tourists are indeed something great?

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



WITHDRAWING FROM THE WORLD

Saturday, January 13, 2018 – Aizawl (India) Tobacco Market

23.734564,92.718703

I've quite forgotten how tobacco smells, about what an intriguing, heady perfume it is. But the memory's wafting back. I'm looking at some 20 little stands located in an outhouse in Bara Bazar: there are heaps of tobacco lying around everywhere, with little piles of yellowish cigarette-paper nestling into them. Every now and then a swathe of smoke drifts through the room, emitting the smell of glowing cardboard and fast-burning pieces of wood. It's cool inside this cellar because it lies under the stairs leading to the upper floor of the house, and the dealers have kindled a cosy fire over which they can warm their hands from time to time.

The tobacco sellers, who are almost without exception women, actively advertise their wares by puffing on cigarette after cigarette. The old lady, whose stand is in front of the shaft that lets some

daylight into the cellar, has nothing to do at the moment except to slowly puff one cloud after the other into the air. Lost in thought, she sits there staring into space. The smoke clearly provides her with everything she needs at that moment. Even quieter is the man who lies dozing behind her on some tobacco bags. The mood and the light remind me of tavern paintings, like those often painted by David Teniers or Adriaen Brouwer. In their scenes, too, there is a fair deal of smoking and invariably somebody snoozing – and often, through a door in the background, a strong shimmer that penetrates the room, hinting at the existence of a brighter world outside.

While savouring the scene here in Mizoram, where almost seventy per cent of the population depend on the cigarette, I suddenly remember



what had once so fascinated me about smoking — which had been part of everyday life on the streets of Europe, too, back then: The beauty of the act of smoking, of course, but also of that moment of withdrawing from the world, when you make the tobacco glow and release a big cloud into the air from your mouth, creating your own space wherever you are. These clouds of smoke have always seemed to me like speech bubbles, with a thousand

squiggles and stripes, curves, loops, cavities and halos — utterly abstract and purely ornamental statements. In bringing a ban on smoking in Europe our concern was also that people should be more restricted to the concrete, the real, the tangible. We have gained in health, as a consequence, but probably lost in poesy.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



FRISKING AROUND WITH THE DOG OF GOD

Sunday, January 14, 2018 – Aizawl (India) Khatla North Kohhran

23.722392,92.717556

I'm too early. The main hall is already quite crowded, but there's space in the wings. Where I sit down, the benches are empty. The Khatla North Kohhran has little in common with churches as we know them in Europe. It's more like a tenement with shops and a garage on the ground floor and offices, classrooms and a large meeting-room adorned with brocade curtains with a white cross hanging in the centre. The pulpit is reminiscent of the seat of a judge. The wooden benches, however, look just like those in the rural churches in France or Italy. Only the board to kneel on is missing – that's because Presbyterians believe that only the mind kneels before God. As such, they pray standing up or sitting down. Soon, gentlemen in suits and ties holding big notebooks swarm into different corners of the room. They are not members of the choir, as I sus-

pect, but donation collectors. The name of every person who gives a donation is recorded in writing; only my money flutters unregistered into the lap of the shrine. In any case, my outfit makes me unfit to adorn the register lines – considering that the rest of the people here are toggled up in the poshest of clothes, in their Sunday best.

I am not sure if the service has already started. An elderly lady utters a few quiet words into a microphone – and everyone closes their eyes. Seems as if the preliminaries are in progress. There is still a crowd between the stairs and the foyer, though, while some extraneous noise is jarring its way into the sanctum of God.

Then, almost as if their entry has been choreographed, about thirty young ladies rush into the church and make their way purposefully towards



the corner in which I am seated. Clearly, all generations have their assigned place in here; only I have foolishly perched myself on the bank of the clever virgins. I make myself shrink as much as I can but I am rapidly encircled, hemmed in on all sides; once again I find myself in a situation from which I can probably not free myself without resorting to coarse measures. For once that does not bother me overmuch – because, hey, how often in life are you engulfed by a bevy of nubile nymphets giggling away in Sabbath gaeity, freshly showered, dressed in their best clothes, and smelling fabulous?

I am suddenly seized by a sense of fear: that my skin might just reveal the aroma of the spicy dog-gut I had eaten the night before. What will my entourage of sweet-smelling roses say when they learn that I have nonchalantly taken pleasure in the body and blood of my best friend? I calm down with the thought that every lamb of God will ultimately be slaughtered and the realisation that I am definitely not the only one in the shrine who had consumed *Ui* yesterday – after all, dog meat is on perennial offer in the markets of the city.

Those who eat dog meat are those who savage the sacred border between the kingdom of animals you caress and the kingdom of animals you slaugh-

ter. Absurd as this distinction is, it is an iron law in many societies. I know – and admire – many people who have such an intimate relationship with their four-legged friends that they actually consider the latter to be the better beings. But then: If you are not supposed to eat an ordinary being, how much worse is it when you dig your teeth into the better being?

Again, there is a bustle in the crowd. Men are now squeezing their way through the rows and handing out notes bearing the stamp of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram. Clearly, the church council, the chieftains, are being elected. The young ladies are prepared for the event: picking up pens, laying prayer books on knees clad in silk stockings or wrapped in embroidered sarongs or decorated with velcro-studs; laying down the chits and noting down a series of names without any ado. I am excluded from the vote, naturally. My neighbour on the left looks through her large designer glasses at my empty hands. I shrug. She beams at me as if I have paid her the nicest compliment of her life. Unfortunately, she looks just like the young model striking a pose with a spaniel in the giant placard in front of the church, promoting a groomer with a peculiar name that I cannot remember just then.



I realise I am something of a sham – which does not make me feel entirely at home in a church (even if things are very different here). I allow the arguments for and against the consumption of dog meat flit like pinballs through my mind, but I'm not really troubled by the question. I'm playing around with my 'guilty conscience' as if it is a game that will keep me occupied until the service comes to an end – which is likely to take a while in a place such as this one, where even the youth stream unit-edly into the church.

I had actually wanted to make an excursion into the countryside today. But the hotel staff had informed me that no driver would be available before twelve noon because «all the drivers in church» in the morning. So I had decided to attend the service, in anticipation of hearing some singing. Songs, however, have been absent so far – a lacuna that has led my brain to gnaw half-heartedly on the matter of eating dog.

If I were required to present my case on feasting on dog with factual arguments it would be simple. I

have no ambivalent feelings about being a carnivore. Not even while sitting in church. I am a meat eater. And if you can eat one type of meat, namely animal, you can eat another type – any type. If you eat the Lamb of God, the ox, and the donkey, which were witnesses at the birth of Christ, why on earth should you spare the dog of God in your cuisine?

The notes are collected again, and a real pastor in a gray uniform marches up to the microphone. Suddenly everyone jumps up, singing a short song that all of them seem to know by heart. Then they lower their heads and pray: from the rhythm it can only be the Lord's Prayer. It seems to me that the service is starting only now. But as soon as «Amen» has been uttered, everyone starts to stampede towards the exit. «Finish?» I ask my neighbour. «Yes, finish,» she answers merrily, again beaming at me in exactly the fashion the woman with the spaniel in the placard does. At that instant, I remember the name of the dog grooming parlour: «Mercy».

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaran.





THE MANDARIN PEEL

Tuesday, January 23, 2018 – from Jorethang to Legship (India)

(27.171998,88.297662)

Just as we are approaching Mabong, the jeep brakes sharply and stops. Three men dressed in thick, woolen jackets march towards grimly towards us; it looks as if they want to ride with us. Hell, there are already eleven people in the jeep, but the driver points to the backseat, at me. I see no way in which I can make myself even thinner than I have already done on this ride, so I just ignore his gesture and focus on the tangerine that I've just carefully peeled – a real finger feat given the cramped space in the jeep and the countless potholes in the road. But the trio outside insists. The driver then turns towards me and asks: «Did you throw something out of the window?» I finally understand: the gentlemen want to help us, they think we've lost something! «Oh, I only threw some tangerine peel out of the window, so there's no need for us to turn back,» I

reply jocularly. All of a sudden there is growling and rumbling, raving and ranting inside the jeep. The passengers are talking agitatedly to each other, gesticulating and shouting at me. I do not understand a word. Finally, the three young men with whom I share the first row of backseats rustle up some words in English and tell me vehemently that passengers under no circumstances should throw anything out of the window of a vehicle. I stammer something about it being «organic waste» and «anyway, in India...», but then I realise that the matter is dead serious and it would be wiser to keep my beak buttoned.

«We were caught red-handed, caught in the act,» the driver says, «and the gentlemen are very upset. But they're letting you go because you're a guest in our country.» I stammer a weak «thank



you». He starts the engine and we set off again. I try my darnedest to hide how stupid I'm feeling – and how profoundly misunderstood. I think about how careful I usually am with my rubbish in India, even when I see everybody else just dumping their garbage on the street or chucking it into the bushes – whether they are footing it around or riding in a bus. But it's of no use, sometimes you simply do not get the chance to justify your actions. Anyway, at the moment, my view is split into two by the backpack resting on my knees. On the right, through the scratched window-pane I can see a narrow valley lined with a row of power plants. In the waning daylight, the landscape is getting more and more dusty with every passing minute. On the left, I can see the filigreed neck of a young woman wearing her black hair in a top-knot. She is sitting in front with her legs guarding my travel bag, which is squeezed in below them. The woman is about 25 or 30 years old – but (after me) she's the oldest on board. In her lap is a plastic bag of pink cotton candy. Now and then she sucks on a corner of the

plastic. Perhaps she is taking the cotton candy to her child, and taking a wee taste of it en route. Shortly after we pass Mabong, while I'm pondering over my faux pas with the tangerine peel, she turns her head towards me. She has a strikingly pure, beautiful face with bulging eyes. She looks straight at me without smiling, without saying a word. I wish there was some solidarity, better still a hint of complicity, in her eyes, but there is none. After a few seconds, she turns her face away.

Shortly before Legship, two schoolgirls in the backseat strike up a conversation with me. Of course, they ask me where I'm from. They are pleased with my answer. «Switzerland must be a very clean place,» they say, that's what their teacher had told them. «No, it's not all that clean», I reply, your teacher is probably mistaken. They giggle at the idea that their schoolteacher's world view could be inaccurate. And I realise once again that you mostly first make an ass of yourself in front of yourself.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



ACTUALLY

Wednesday, 24 January, 2018 – Tashiding (India) Pema Homestay

27.3239016,88.2872402

I'm lying in bed. Under a thick, fragrant blanket that has warmed countless other guests before me. It is pitch-dark because the power has failed again. It has been out for over an hour. Rain is beating down against the windowpanes, somewhere to my left water is dripping into a yard, making a hollow sound like that of a sleepy drumbeat. A flash of lightning illuminates my room now and again. Had I ever noticed just how bright the light of lightning is? Or, are only Himayalan flashes such a brilliant white? Soon, thunder follows. It's not an aggressive thunder that crashes down as if it's furiously breaking a giant log, rather it's a majestic thunder that takes its time to roll, knowing full well that it has enough space in these skies, and that nobody will oppose it, or interrupt it.

The thunder reminds me of the monks' prayers earlier in the evening in the great convent of Tashiding – the voice of the leader, to be precise: a deep, voluminous, incredibly calm and self-confident baritone. The monastery is located on a hilltop about two kilometres from the village. At first I heard only this one voice and the sound of a dull, rather quickly struck drum. As I approached the prayer hall, though, I heard other higher-pitched voices joining in, and then archaic croaking horns being blown, bells chiming, and little drums whirling, and even the sound of whistles being blown, a loud clash of sounds: half-heavenly, half-hellish. As it ebbed, the head priest took the lead again – with a kind of sigh in which there was so much serenity that it sent a shiver down my spine. If the universe really came into being, then it came neither from

the big bang nor from a primal fart, but definitely from such a great sigh.

What colour is the blanket under which I lie? Is it really orange and dark red? Or are they merely the robes of the monks? And is the wall of the room really green? I know for sure that it is not white. Maybe it is blue? A flash of lightning would bring enlightenment, but none seems to want to enter my room right now. I remember the «guru» (as he had introduced himself to himself), who had told me in a partly disdainful, partly arrogant manner – while on a train journey from Thalassery to Kozhikode a year earlier – that everything that I was seeing rush past my window was only an illusion. Behind it lay another reality, the actual reality, which only people like him could see. So, why was I struggling to photograph this apparent world from the window of the train, he had asked me, pointing out that it should really not matter to me whether the fields were ordered with rice, with coconut palms, with camels, or with cars. By that token, the colour of the blanket should also be of no importance. But I found the guru so disagreeable that I have absolutely no desire to be comforted by him at this moment in spite of being engulfed by darkness. Moreover – my head sprays this thought like paint into the lacquer of the inner wall of thought – the symbolic and the metaphoric has always interested me more than the real thing. So I need to know immediately whether this blanket is really orange. I search next to the bed for my smartphone, which is blessed with a flashlight, but my hand finds the camera instead. I turn on the flash, hold the camera to my eye, albeit without being able to see anything through the viewfinder, and press.

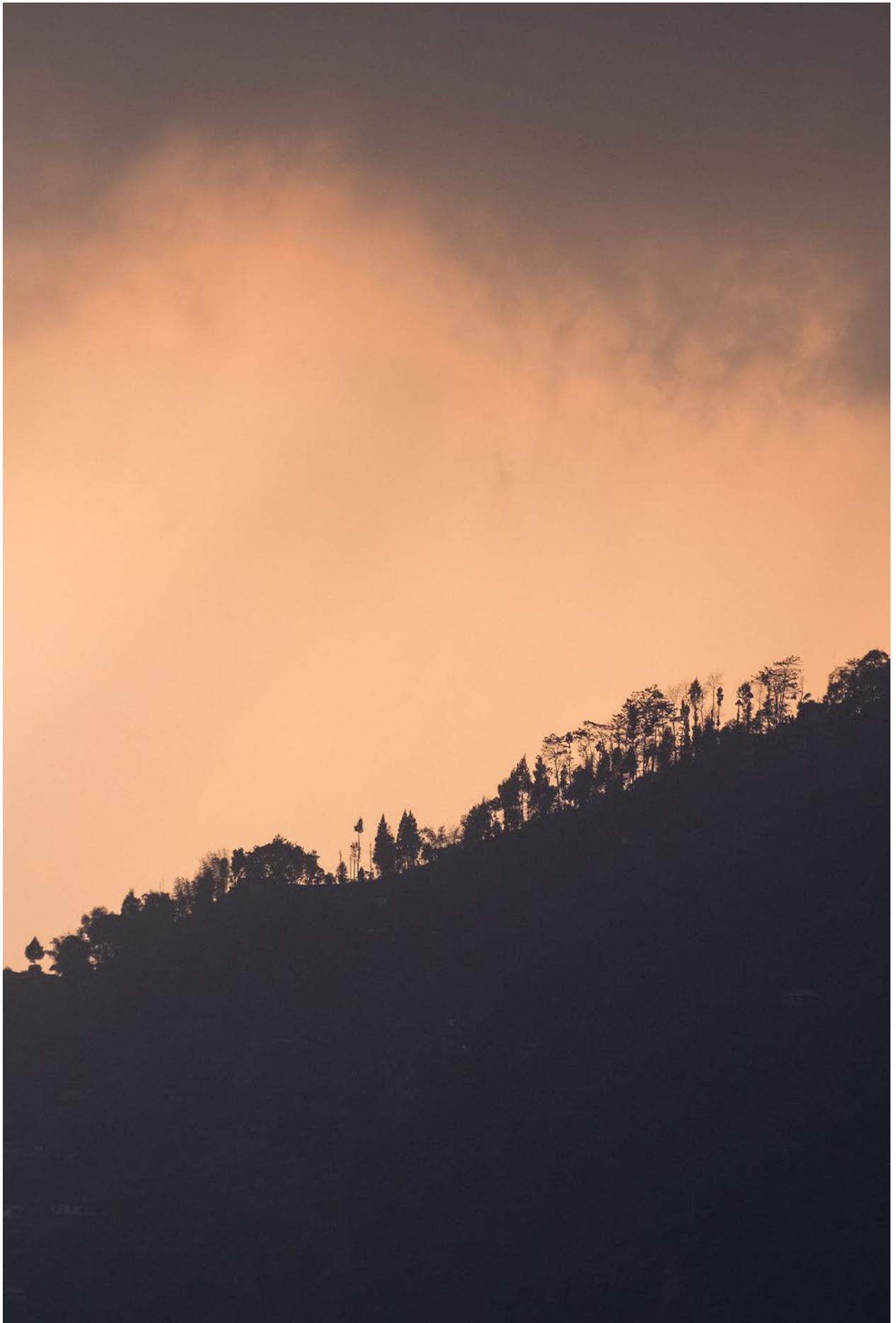
Of course, the ceiling is orange-red, the wall is bright green, while the table and door are blue. The stark contrasts of my bedroom landscape remind me of the evening view from the monastery square – when a cavalcade of thunderstorms had rumbled across the valleys as I was making my ascent to the temple mount. Their cloud-filters had broken down the light in such a fashion that the air was suffused with the shade of salmon pink, the ideal wallpaper for the final scene of the theatre of the day. I love it when the sun shines on things from behind and leads all the details on the earth to disappear, turns everything into a silhouette, a

series of letters over which only the sky can spread out in various tones and shades. It's a moment at which you are reminded about the concept of Maya, which the guru had wished to rub under my eyelids. But for me it is sufficient that the world appears utterly different in the backlight, that it stirs me in quite another way, allows me to address and approach it in a markedly different manner – that itself engages me deeply.

But now I am keen on preparing a tea with my immersion rod (orange blossom with milk powder and some sugar – a dream or, a consolation, if you will). And I would like to read a few more pages. Only the electricity does not cooperate. The Olympic thunderstorm-victory parade has travelled southwards, only now and then does the notion of thunder roll into my ear. The rain has stopped, too. How quiet it is now, outside: no vehicles, no voices, no TV or radios blaring.

At eight o'clock sharp, the officer from the Tashiding Police Outpost had stepped into the street and blown his whistle three times – once at the upper fringe of the village, once at the lower fringe of the village, and finally in the middle of the village, in front of the outpost. Once these whistles were blown it was forbidden to go out into the street, I was informed by Schering Ongmu – that's the name of the student who takes care of me at the inn. Even the dogs seem to stick to the curfew and howl their hearts out far away from the village.

I stretch my fingers out, and they find a caramel candy in the outside pocket of my backpack that is standing next to my bed. I know that it's an «Alpenliebe», I do not need a light to know that. How unusually sweet the candy tastes. Can it be that caramel tastes sweeter in the dark, that the Alps are more «lieb», feel more dear? When I move the candy over my tongue, it sounds as though I have a stone in my mouth. Like it had earlier in the evening, when I had suddenly felt hungry on the climb to the monastery – although I was a bit nervous because of the rain and the sudden flashes of lightning in the grey behind the trees. I had unpacked a short but thick banana that I had bought at a stall in the village and pushed it bit by bit into my mouth. It tasted highly aromatic and I was pretty greedy. Suddenly, however, I had bitten into a stone. Amazed, I had detached the stone from the sweet pulp and spat it into my hand. And





I found myself staring at a black pebble, the size of a pea, in the hollow between my fingers. How on earth had a stone gotten into my banana? Was it a joke by the fruitseller? Unlikely. A swelling during growth? Improbable.

I had discovered a small eye on the stone and at that instant I had remembered that the banana is actually a berry, like the blackberry or raspberry, with seeds that are crunched between our teeth when we munch on them. The banana also has seeds, but humans have managed to breed this fruit with such manipulative success that its embryonic blobs are now normally minute dots in the flesh. Only this particular seed had decided to flout the human-designed rule and defiantly grow and grow until it reached a hundred times, perhaps even a thousand times the size of its brothers and sisters.

Something is tripping through the street past my window: maybe a monkey? But doesn't he be-

long on the roof? And where are his enemies, the dogs? I notice I'm getting sleepy and I pinch the candy between my molars and lower lip. Normally the stones are so small that we do not even notice them while eating. But this one has become so big that I almost cut my teeth on it. What belongs to which reality?

It's raining again now. Now that the policeman has whistled everyone into their houses, will the village reveal itself in its true reality? What would constitute a false reality? And what kind of surface can be expected on a 'improper' road? And where did I actually put my smartphone? This blanket smells like that; no, it's not rain, it's a small animal out there. How sweet my mouth is now, on the left. Or right? I should brush my teeth. Actually.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



THE RELEASE

Thursday, 25 January, 2018 – Yuksom (India) Norbugang

27.368804,88.216180

«Everything here is cardamom,» he says, wishing to punch a semi-circle through the air with the right hand, but his hand is so fast that it comes almost full circle, close to a pirouette – an action that leaves him feeling slightly dazed. But the man's circular movement is appropriate because cardamom encircles us here. A little further north is the grove with the big stupa consecrating the spot where three lamas had met in 1642. They had come from different directions over the Himalayas to enthrone the first religious leader of the Tibetans of Sikkim: Chogyal Phuntsog Namgyal. His conduct, his reign, was watched over not only by the Buddha but also the Kanchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world, the glazed white peaks of which emerged for a few minutes out of the dense clouds that normally obscure them.

Norbugang Tschörten on the western edge of the sprawling Yuksom is the birthplace of the land and is worshipped accordingly. Thousands of prayer flags of various hues flutter in the woods, inviting you to rest and reflect. But as it is humid and cold under the trees, I climb over the boundary wall and walk out into the fields basking in the sun. I simply love this moment at which I get out of the dark and cool and enter the bright and warm daylight, which the eyes are still not accustomed to but which delights and relaxes every cell in the body, invoking a sense of redemptive intoxication, or heady redemption, as it were. I always notice then just how cold my jaw is, how contracted, and how it gradually begins to thaw and relax again – and it seems as though the language is streaming back into my body.



My interlocutor has recovered from his blow and is now standing right in front of me. He's wearing a black suit with pinstripes, but under the jacket he's wearing not a shirt but a bright orange T-shirt. A wide-rimmed woollen cap sits on his head, his eyes are almost closed, and one can see only a distant glint behind the folds of skin. His cheeks are covered with a fine down, with only a few strong, long strands of his hair dangling, like slain roundworms, from his cheeks and his chin. His mouth seems constantly busy with something and I'm afraid he will spew a stream of blood-red betelnut juice at our feet. But he only opens his mouth for a moment and in that second I see that he is just



playing around with a canine hanging loosely out of his upper jaw. It's hard for me to tell his age; perhaps, like me, he's about fifty, perhaps a lot older. Or younger? His skin is pretty smooth.

«Don't even the faces of our old women look like cardamom? Cardamom adorned with gold?» he observes with a chuckle, swaying a bit on his feet, losing a bit of his balance.

«But gold does not warm you in the winter,» he says, removing a small bottle filled with a tea-coloured liquid from his trouser pocket: «But this certainly does!»

«You mean cardamom,» I correct him.

«What?»

«I mean, you wish to say that cardamom does not warm (you) in winter.»

He stares at me uncomprehendingly. Then he shakes his head and I suddenly get the feeling that he thinks I am a figment of his imagination. In a bid to prove I'm real, I switch to another topic: «It's nice here, and nice and warm.»

He laughs again, and the sound is like that of a bamboo pole splintering inside his chest. «Look at those faces! They only want gold, gold, gold!»

My manoeuvre to change the subject has obviously failed. Well, it's true that the heads of old





people here look a bit like cardamom pods. In Sikkim, it is not green cardamom that is cultivated, but the black one – the capsules of which are dark brown, crinkled and fibrous. In this part of the state, little else is grown other than *Amomum subulatum*. On every patch that is halfway cultivable, this member of the ginger family patterns the earth with its lanceolate leaves. That is because the spice is a lucrative business, with the farmers earning 1,500 rupees or more per kilo. You can get rich with it, people here tell me with assurance. Black cardamom plays an important role, especially in Mughlai recipes. It is also used in the mix of spices that make up India's masala tea. However, nobody cooks with it in Sikkim itself.

«Only gold, just gold,» the pinstriped man chants once again. Then he falls silent, swaying slightly on his feet, his bamboo stick raised in

the wind. His face is now serious, a study in concentration, as though he's thinking hard about something. He seems to have forgotten that he is standing in front of me. Perhaps that's the cue for me to depart. But suddenly his face brightens up, he raises his chin a bit in the air, looks at me cheerfully – triumphantly, actually – lowers his head again, purses his lips in the form of a kiss, inhales deeply through his nostrils, and spits his canine tooth out into his right hand. Then he lifts the tooth close to his eyes, clenches his hand into a fist, wipes some blood off his lips with the back of the fist, shoves his left hand into his trouser-pocket, pulls out the bottle of booze and holds it out to me, with an expression of absolute release on his face.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaran.



THE GREAT STEAM

Thursday, December 22, 2016 – Jodhpur (India) Nai Sarak

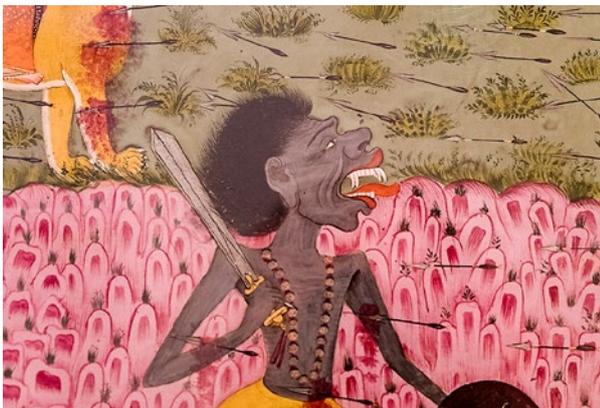
26.294182,73.024177

There are few moments when I feel as lost as I do in an Indian bazaar. This has something to do with the truth that I cannot be a buyer and therefore not play a meaningful role here; after all, I do not need a diesel engine to drive my rice-mill or a rose-red mat for my bathroom. As a consequence, a thick «Gawker» is written on my forehead – and I am at best of interest to the spice traders. Though that's not quite the reason that I feel oddly uncertain here: as if I have not yet fully understood how the earth's gravity functions in this place.

I stand at Nai Sarak in Jodhpur, in front of the gateway to Ghanta Ghar square – which, with its tall Victorian-style clock-tower, is the ticking heart of Jodhpur's old town. The sun has just bid goodbye to a horizon of dense smog, and scattered street lamps form shiny dots in the milky purple haze

that it leaves behind. High above the flickering citylights, the mighty fort of Mehrangarh stands a-glow against the increasingly darkening sky. Mopeds, tuk-tuks, bicycles, and pedestrians bumble through the tall gate, which rises like a sign of order above the bustle. Handcarts laden with pomegranates, guavas, bananas or plastic utensils, squeeze through the heaving mass of humanity.

In a tiny stall across the street samosas are being fried in a one-yard-long cauldron; next to it a sugarcane press is in motion, spitting a couple of fibres into the air every now and again. Behind a dense hedge of parked motorcycles some old men are sitting in small armchairs in front of a coffee kitchen, sipping their sticky-sweet drink from espresso cups printed with sundry patterns. A jeans-seller hollers praises his fake brands to the skies. He has a beau-



tiful, high voice, and when he calls out «Levi's», «Lee», or «Diesel», it sounds almost like a liturgical hymn. But his alto is drowned out by the rattle of two-stroke engines, the wheeze of the nutcracker, the whistling of overheated motorcycle brakes – not to mention the ubiquitous vehicle horns, the shrill tones of which pierce through the soundscapes of Indian streets like arrows in the body of Saint Sebastian or the bodies felled by the blood-thirsty Goddess Kali in combat with an army of demons. Would it be a business model in India to introduce a horn for pedestrians?

Now there's the loud ringing of a brilliant bell – a vehement clang against the superior force of

honks. It emerges from a small pavilion, crowned by a pink turban, which stands in front of the gate in the middle of the square, surrounded on all sides by dense traffic. Between a ticket kiosk and a drinks stall, a Hanuman temple, barely two square metres in size, has been crammed with various little statues and pictures of gods. The priest, standing on the street-edge in front of his shrine in his scarlet coat, is now circling a butterlamp through his divine territory, singing hoarsely and chanting a prayer. Half-a-dozen men are gathered in front of the little temple. Even a gray-haired tourist-couple stands by for the benediction – and the man tries to photograph the shrine with his long zoom lens







poised between the worshippers. When the priest suddenly squirts water on the street, the couple rush away laughing – like as if they had just been showered with confetti at the Cologne Carnival.

Everything in this marketplace seems agitated, it is bursting with a restless lust for life. The scene seems self-sustaining in a strange way, kept aloft by a unique vigour with a sprinkling of perfumes of gasoline and smoke, masala tea and frying oil, detergent and soap.

A range of things irritate me here. At the moment, it is the all-pervading enthusiasm that preoccupies me – simply because I seldom experience it myself. Hardly ever when I read a text or look at a picture. A little more often when I discover a special dish. Most often, when I hear music, loud, with headphones, solely for my ears. Confronted with the fire which whips up everything, I feel cool, distant – and I suddenly have the suspicion that I may not be capable of art or of the art of living. Because enthusiasm is that substance, according to Robert Musil at any rate, without which no art can exist. What would life be without art? Am I just a dry piece of bread that longs for a little butter?

Now my gaze moves beyond the hurly-burly of the bazaar to focus on individual figures. I see

an old woman sitting on the floor offering knives, pincers, padlocks and cauliflowers laid out on a cloth. She sends out desert curses after customers who, despite her energetic negotiations, refuse to be her customers. I take in the sight of a tea merchant who has set up shop in the archway: «Tea keeps you fit and fine,» is written on a sign. But going by the look on his face while he sits amidst his red-and-gold packets, his life is dull. Even the face of the auctioneer of colourful plastic slippers, whose voice seems so vibrant, seems to signify that all this is neither about the desire to do business nor about something with a future, but simply about surviving the day. And is there any reason for the wrinkled green-grocer to tell me with every wrinkle about what a lousy customer I am?

Even though the scene appears to be imbued with a spirit of derring-do, with the get-up-and-go attitude of workaday life, most of the vendors, who look as if they are contributing their bit to the enthusiasm of the whole, seem to be trapped in a mundane routine.

It occurs to me that when I am travelling I often experience moments in which I am suddenly overcome by a sort of enthusiasm that is neither



triggered by an identifiable fact, nor aimed at a goal or specific prospect. I cannot describe the feeling of these moments, but they are precious to me. For Musil, such «bone-free enthusiasm and ashes that burn to nothing» was proof of «how much steam one makes». But what would an In-

dian bazaar be without such steam? And what would I be?

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.

The German version of this text has first been published on Friday, April 7, 2017 in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, p. 63.



THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

Sunday, December 25, 2016 – Lodhruva (India) Jain Tempel

26.985387,70.802630

It is in the nature of a wish that it remains unfulfilled. Or, if the wish is fulfilled, it brings more affliction than joy. The wish is consequently used in literature usually to emphasise the vanity of desire, or to heighten an experience, to allow it to be depicted in even brighter light. «Stay, you're so beautiful,» says Goethe's Faust to the moment. The moment will, of course, not fulfill his wish – but that is precisely what shows us how special the moment must be.

Hermann Hesse, too, allows himself, at the start of his story, *Augenlust (Records of an Indian Journey)*, to have three wishes fulfilled by an Ifrit: «Being healthy, having a beautiful, young lover with me, and having more than ten thousand dollars.» After making several purchases in Singapore's best stores, though, he concludes that «everything you

can buy for money» in Asia is «dubious». On the other hand, «there are treasures on show everywhere and belong to those whose lustful eyes know how to find them.» And, ultimately, one can «take nothing back to the west except a flash in memory».

Knowing the peculiar distress that humans suffer due to their desires, most religions have specialised in mercifully relieving people of them – for example, by imposing a ban on them. At the same time they have made themselves an institution, the only institution, that can help fulfil a wish here and there – not too many, of course, because uncontrolled wishes are not in the interests of any religion. All the more astonishing is the visit to Lodhruva, the old capital of the Rajput rulers of the Bathi dynasty, of which only a Jain temple has survived.



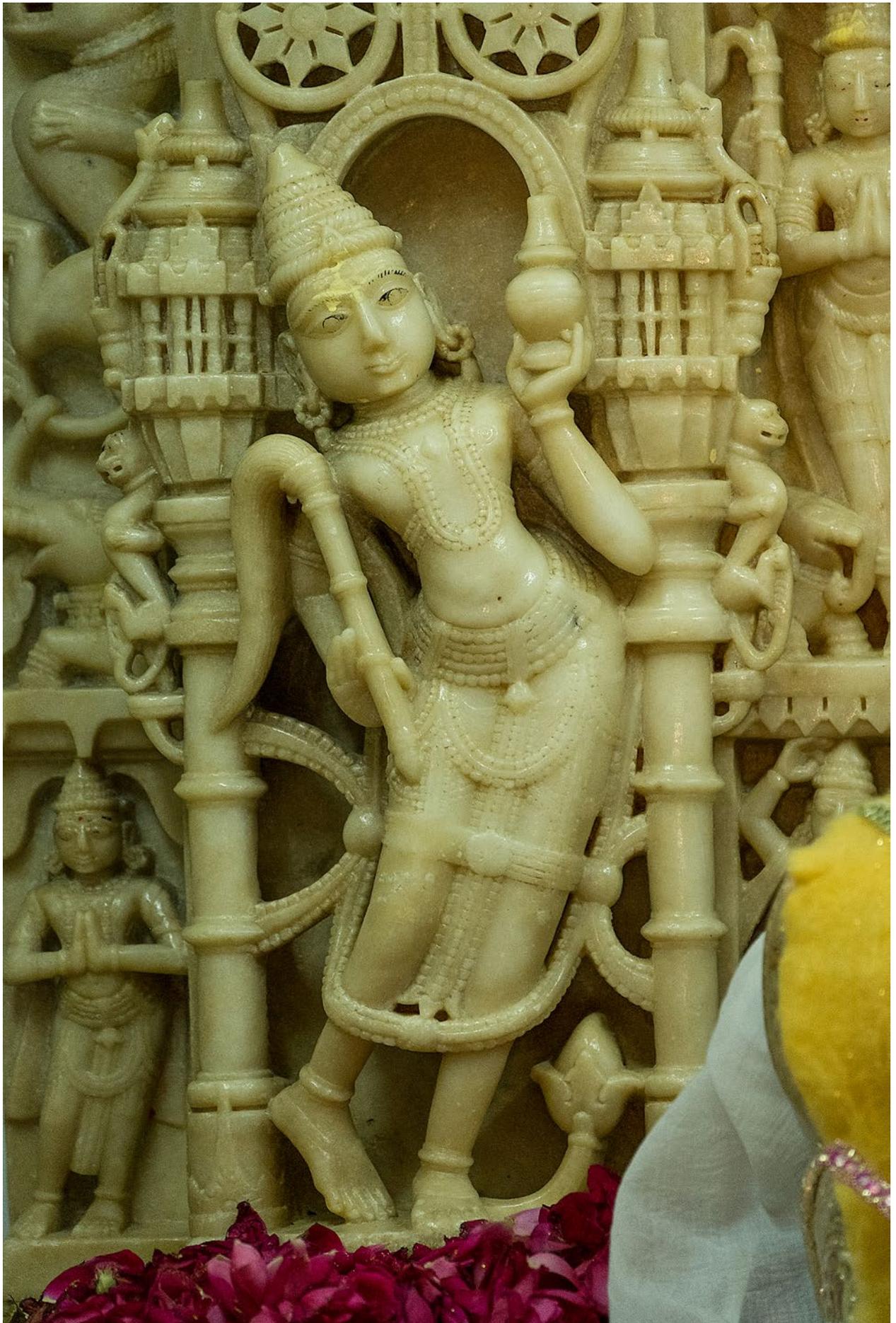
«Sir, please, look up there,» intones a voice from behind me. I turn around and look into the pock-marked, sweat-streaked face of an elderly man standing behind me with his arms crossed behind his back. He wears a light gray kurta, freshly ironed, and over it a western jacket of wool and black silk, on which a pocket watch-chain dangles. My eyes follow in the direction indicated by his bushy eyebrows, and look up over the pedestal, which is ornamented by naive sculptures that I have just been examining, at a peculiar picture brightened by the sunlight. At first glance, I think it's a form of agave with strongly twisted leaves on the roof. But would they have built a wire cage to protect a cactus from the birds? It's only then that I realise that the tendrils are fashioned out of metal, which is painted a dark green. Can it be that I also see coloured flowers and small bird-figures in the tendrils?

«This is a wish tree,» says the man, making a gesture to his right in a manner as if he were inviting me to enter his house. «You can make any wish you want.» I now hear voices wafting out from within the sanctuary. They are high-pitched male voices and the men are singing a song in which different melodies are flowing through each other. They sing without pressure, in a muted fashion, yet

it sounds a bit off-key. Before I step out of the temple into the narrow courtyard, I see some young men settling down on the ground before the shrine -- right in front of the black figure of the 23rd tirthankara Parshva and the altar-plate made of silky-shiny Gujarat marble with an artfully dynamic, almost fully sculpted set of figures.

«Are they working on their wishes?» I ask my host -- and immediately feel rather stupid about it. But he generously spreads out his arms, declaring, «Of course, everybody does! You should not miss the chance!» And leaves. As he disappears I get the feeling that I have just met a genie. I go around the corner, for a moment, only to find that he has vanished into thin air: there is no bottle, there is only an empty bag of chips drifting through the yard.

The voices of the men swell to an evocative chant, obviously headed for a climax. Surely this is the right moment to wish for something. Only what? Health and a long life? Naturally! But wouldn't that be something selfish? Peace on earth? Clear! But why should I, of all people, give up my wish for something that would be in everyone's interest? The well-being of my neighbour? Or a tool with which different wishes can be ful-





filled? A never-ending bank account, for example? That seems a bit materialistic to me. Of course, the *Kalpavrikshas*, as the wish-fulfilment trees are called in Jainism, are not there to fulfill any wishes. To put it simply, there are only about ten such trees and each one can only supply specific things. One tree donates nutritious drinks, another food, a third light, a fourth musical instruments, dishes, fine clothes or fragrances. Pretty tangible things in the final reckoning. I decide to wish for something quite pragmatic for the time-being: namely, that I should soon be able to pounce on food with pleasure, without fear of immediate repercussions. For three days I have been plagued by severe diarrhoea;

everything that I've fed my body as solid food has been ripped out of it within minutes as a great gush of water.

The Wish Tree has no ear for me. I notice this while trying to nurture my body with a banana a bit later. So I celebrate Christmas Eve with salt water and sugared tea – all alone on the rooftop terrace of my Jaisalmer hotel, surrounded by a serene, dark night. I do not attach much importance to the festival of Christ – but Christmas has a way of creating itself. Even without a tree, without songs, without lights, without presents, and with no faith in the story, Christmas has never gone by without touching



me. Moreover, in recent years, I have always seized the opportunity to cook something special during Christmastime – and benefited from the fact that things that are not available during the rest of the year are on offer at this time. For example, two years ago, I stewed a wild duck, in the previous year a capon, in 2012 a whole dove. I remember the two lentils-filled pigeons that I had prepared in 2002. It's one of the first recipes I published and one of the first dishes I photographed with my first digital camera. My girlfriend at the time had fallen ill just before Christmas with a severe intestinal flu. I had nonetheless gone ahead and cooked with great fanfare, and she had not had a bite of it. I had, of course, described to her in vivid detail the mystical aroma of the lentils infused with blood, spices and liver, just as one would describe a garden to a blind person. She had hit the sack before I tackled the second little bird.

Naturally, I still remember the Christmas dinners of my childhood. Every 25th of December we would visit my mother's parents. Granny's treat used to be what we call «Milkenpastetli» – Vol-au-vent with pastry and veal. It was the culinary highlight of the year for me, because I loved the crispy-fat puff pastry, the velvety flesh, the

winey, lemony, sour-bitter flour sauce – and the luscious way it all got mixed up in my mouth: how the puff pastry was pervaded by the sauce but still made itself felt until it was swallowed. Year after year, I had devoured tonnes of patties. I think my record was thirteen pieces. I can still see the disbelieving eyes of my younger brothers, the small glow of pride on my grandmother's face, who was not a prodigious cook, really, and definitely not a person who consciously indulged in a sense of pride.

While I am cruising through my memories of Christmas feasts, a loudspeaker crackles to life a couple of streets away. After a couple of preliminary drumbeats, a male choir begins to sing, much like the one had done on that afternoon in Lodhruva. I can make believe that they are singing to the rhythm of my bubbling belly – or vice versa. Suddenly, I realise I'm feeling a certain sense of satiation, although I have not partaken of anything except tea and water. The Jain tree has not fulfilled my desire for recovery but, who knows, by bringing alive memories of earlier Christmas feasts it has enabled me to pounce on food with relish – even if only in my thoughts.

The two boys, who were helping out at the hotel during the day, now come up. They





spread a mattress on the floor of the terrace, wrap themselves in blankets, and lie down – their faces gleaming blue in the darkness, illuminated by the screens of their mobile phones, sending out their latest news to the world. I think it looks somewhat biblical. That's my

cue: It's time to go to bed. As I grope my way through the dark corridors to my room, I wonder what I will wish for the next time I come across a Kalpavriksha.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balam.





AND THERE THE OILED SOW COUGHS

Wednesday, December 28, 2016 – Udaipur (India) Footbridge, Chand Pole Puliya

24.581242,73.681247

I capitulated as I stood in the middle of the pedestrian bridge connecting the Cham-Puri peninsula with the slightly hilly centre of the old city of Udaipur. I had admired the scene of ornate palaces, temples and houses of the rich merchants emerging gradually from the uniform and undramatic fog into the light of day — gleaming-fresh, as if they were brought forth every morning by the waters of Pichola Lake. I had tasted the flavour of a weak coffee sweetened with condensed milk and spiced with a bit of cardamom: it had clung to my teeth and lingered in my tastebuds for a long time, turning my mouth into one big child's candy. I had imagined how the late rulers of Udaipur and their princes must have slowly woken up from the last opium rush of the night before as daylight was beginning to stream into their arbours. And how

proud they must have felt at being the great-grandsons of the greatest war gurglers that Rajasthan has produced — who knows how boldly they had wielded the scimitar in their own dreams? I had listened to the fast drumming and banging of bells coming from the Old Shiva Temple on the eastern shore of the lake. A frenetic rhythm that would have been an appropriate accompaniment to the appearance of a powerful dignitary. Instead, an old male had hobbled out of the temple, straggled across the pair of steps and carried a small butterlamp to the two altars, bowed briefly before them, circled the pedestals, and disappeared into the building again.

When the sound of the last drumbeat faded away, a marvellous silence enveloped the lake. But all too soon, there was the sound of a cough in a house somewhere behind me, of wracking and



barking for a long minute until the mucus was finally driven out of the bronchs with a retch. Then, as soon as the man's cough stopped, a woman began wrestling at an octave higher with her mucus. I felt a palpable sense of indignation at this disturbance of the peace – and shivered slightly. Places where history is as gloriously visible as in Udaipur make the lives – and deaths – of individuals often seem meaningless. The present has little importance here. I have often registered this fact – but on this pedestrian bridge over Lake Pichhola I am suddenly terribly bothered by it. For sure, I have not come to Udaipur to hear its inhabitants cough; I have come to savour the vision of its palaces, temples and magnificent havelis. This lofty goal, however, suddenly strikes me as being strange, even irrelevant. Does it make sense, is it

worthwhile for one to marvel at all the splendour that rich idiots have erected on the humpbacks of poor dogs? Mustn't I find such a way to travel that people's coughing can also play a role in it? Wasn't that actually what I was looking for?

At that second I surrendered to my own claim of travelling in order to seek a sort of world embrace. This world was an oiled sow; theoretically I could put my arms around it thanks to cheap air connections. But the reality was that it always slipped away from any rapprochement. And just then, almost as if Saint Tussi had heard my thoughts, a powerful cough broke out from the depths of my being. And, as peculiar as this may sound, there was something deeply reassuring about it.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



THE PERFECT COFFEE HOUSE

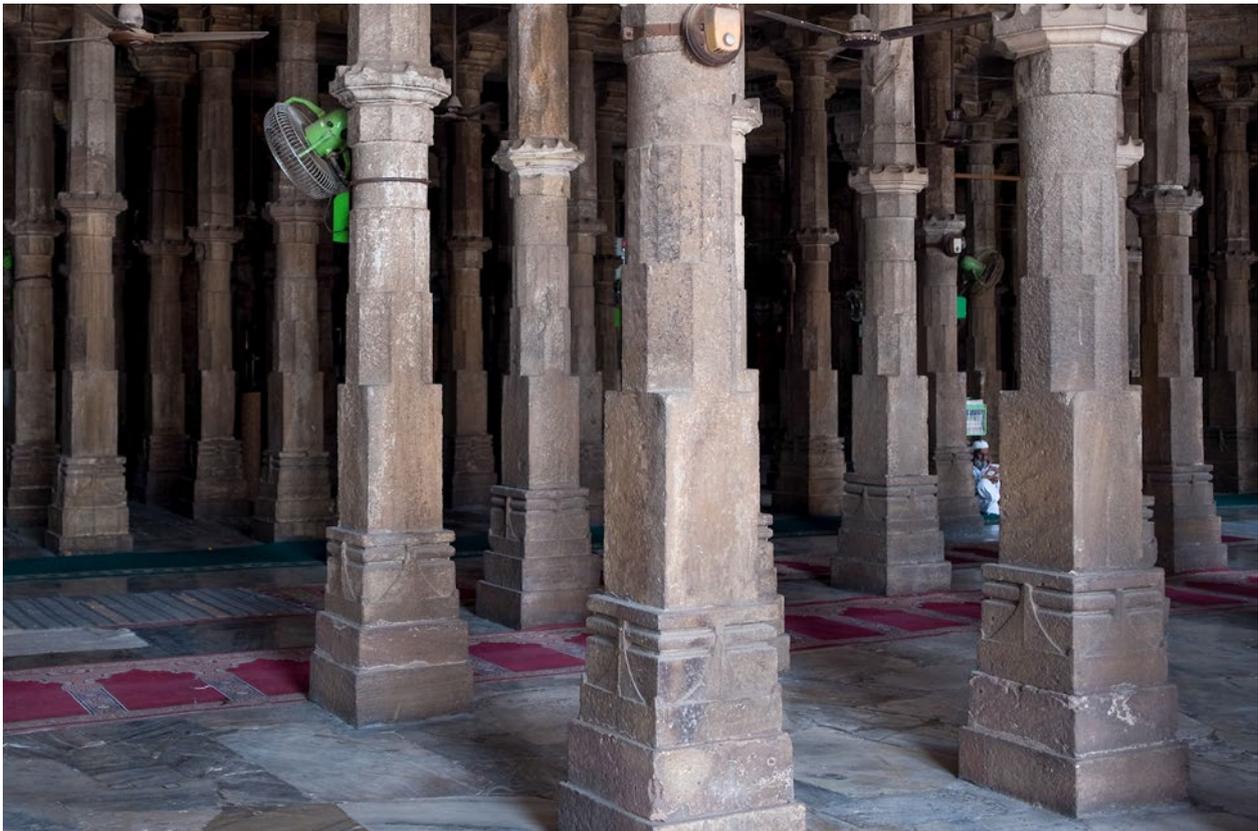
Sunday, 28 January, 2018 – Ahmedabad (India) Jama Masjid

23.023576,72.586507

What I miss most during my travels through India are cafés: not because they offer good coffee (they rarely do), but because they are the place in which my existence is self-evident; no explanations are needed. Of course, this holds true also for a hotel room or an apartment. But unlike the four walls of the latter, behind which the world can sometimes disappear completely, the walls of a café are full of doors through which people stream in and out, as long as they adhere to the practices of the house. That means that in a café you are fully enclosed as well as protected – a combination that is otherwise to be found usually only in the womb of the mother. For anxious and somewhat contact-shy characters like me, cafés are therefore the ideal place to be. I sit oftentimes for hours in front of a long-emptied, near-desolate, dried-up cup and read, write, think

about myself, and occasionally completely forget where I am. This is naturally only possible in real coffee houses, where one is not constantly harassed by waiters to consume.

The perks a good coffee house provides are also offered by a mosque. I realised this when I entered the pillared forest of the Jama Masjid in the heart of the old city of Ahmedabad. Given that a Muslim has to pray several times a day, the opening hours of these mosques are in no way inferior to that of a café. And between prayer sessions, which demand conforming to rituals, you can sit, read, write, dream away, and forget where you actually are. Like the old man sitting on the floor in the middle of the mosque, leaning comfortably against a pillar. He seems completely absorbed in his reading, brushes his beard occasionally, scratches his



head, bores his ears, and clearly feels completely unobserved. We are almost alone in the sprawling hall. Only the caretaker, whose henna-dyed goatee gives him the look of a fashionable goat, scurries past now and again with a shovel, broom and kettle. Outside in the yard, a small boy walks quietly with his dragon through the morning sunlight. The noise of the traffic is distant, the voices of the birds are closer: the gurgling sing-song of the doves, the dry cawing of the crows, the long-drawn piping of the bigger birds of prey, most unsuited to the sounds of a city – the epicentre of which is the stinking mess-of-a-mound of slaughter-waste from the nearby meat market of the Muslims. I take my cue from the old man and lean against a column, take out a book and begin to read. My book is ensconced comfortably on the carpet. And no one bothers me. It appears that even as a non-Muslim I have the right of residence in this mosque. As the hours pass the old man stretches his limbs out more and more, eventually he is almost lying down, and I see him lowering his book more and more often: in sync with his drooping eyes, I assume, because I cannot see him properly from where I am sitting.

I notice that my head is on the verge of drooping, too, and sit up more upright. The man has

hopefully taken the necessary measures, I think and laugh, because I'm reading Hebel's story of the prudent dreamer, who ties slippers to his feet at night because he had once, in a dream, stepped onto a piece of broken glass and suffered terrible, albeit imaginary, pain. Perhaps the story would appeal to the old man – but then perhaps not, because Hebel speaks of Mohamed being «the prophet of lies» – which is indisputably why his book, *Schatzkästlein des Reihmischen Hausfreundes*, is still not compulsory reading in Koranic schools.

I now remember a scene I witnessed a few years earlier that had so surprised me. It was an oppressively sultry evening in Damascus, just before the outbreak of the war. I was at the Umayyad Mosque, one of the oldest, holiest pilgrim-sites of the Muslims, marvelling at the number of men happily sleeping on the rugs lining the cool interior of the magnificent structure. I so liked the idea of being able to enter a church to rest, to even have a siesta – especially as sleep is a state that allows the spirit, of even the most chaste disciple, to escape on some trip or the other and thereby evade the strangle-hold of religious authorities. For those who go to mosques regularly, the sight of sleeping humans may well be a banal matter, but for me

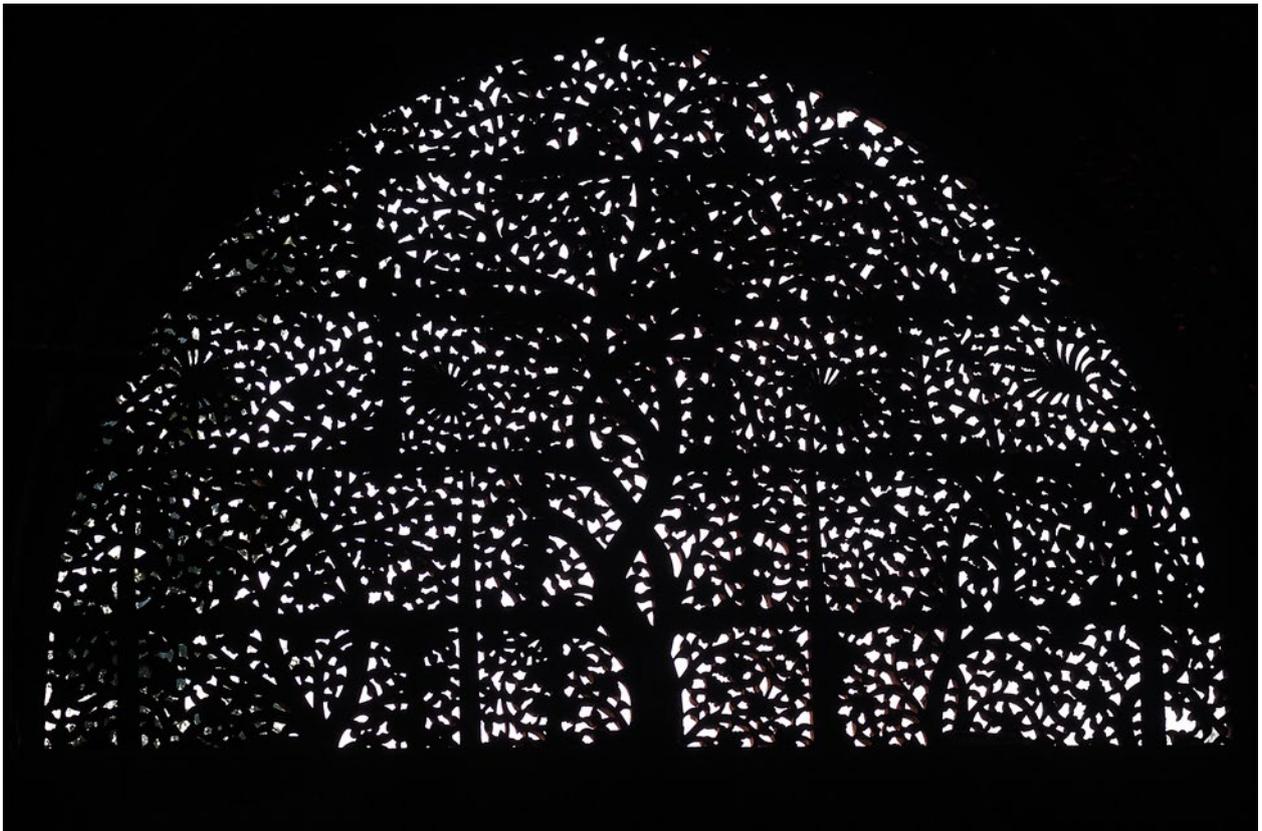


the sight of this mass camp was amazing – and the memory of it never fails to evoke that original sense of disbelief.

The old man has obviously realised that he is about to fall asleep and has stopped reading. He turns towards the mihrab, sits up on his knees, prays briefly, then gets up and leaves. I also scramble up from the floor and follow him into the courtyard that is now bathed in a dark orange light – as it is already evening. We exit the mosque precinct through the north gate and head towards the market. Strangely, the street is busy with only cycle-rickshaws and the trill of their bells sounds almost like a clock pealing or like a friendly caricature of the spiteful motor-horn that hurts your eardrums in regular Indian streets. We go over to the meat market and the old man stops in front of a stall that sells goat lung – it's precisely that stall whose owner had gruffly forbidden me a few hours earlier to take pictures of his ware. Now, however, the mutton-seller is quite transformed: he is exceedingly polite, almost subservient to his customer, who is clearly a respectable citizen. I take advantage of the situation and quickly shoot a photo. We then proceed through a large city gate with mighty wooden doors across a vast, completely deserted

place. And then we are suddenly back in front of a mosque. It looks very similar to the Jama Masjid, except that its façade is painted in different shades of blue, which makes it look highly elegant.

In a large basin the reflected light of the moon shimmers like a lead molding. We enter the interior to see a huge hall full of rugs, pillows, low tables, and armchairs. A soft, white light drifts in through the ornately carved windows, rather jalis (meshes), in which motifs such as an intricately curly tree, palms, flowers, and birds taking off or landing are perfectly arranged. Everywhere, people are lying around, not just men but also women and some children. Some are drinking coffee or tea, others are nibbling on sweets. Some are playing cards, while two old women are engrossed in a chess competition. There is talk, laughter, discussion and debate. In the corner, one man plucks on his double bass, next to him a fat woman wearing powerful headphones is dancing, looking blissfully lost. Between pots planted with banana stalks, four blond men are sitting, tapping on their notebooks, all concentration on their keys. I even see a couple cuddling on a couch, the picture of uninhibited intimacy – in India, that too. Different things seem to make space for each other here, elegantly pass-

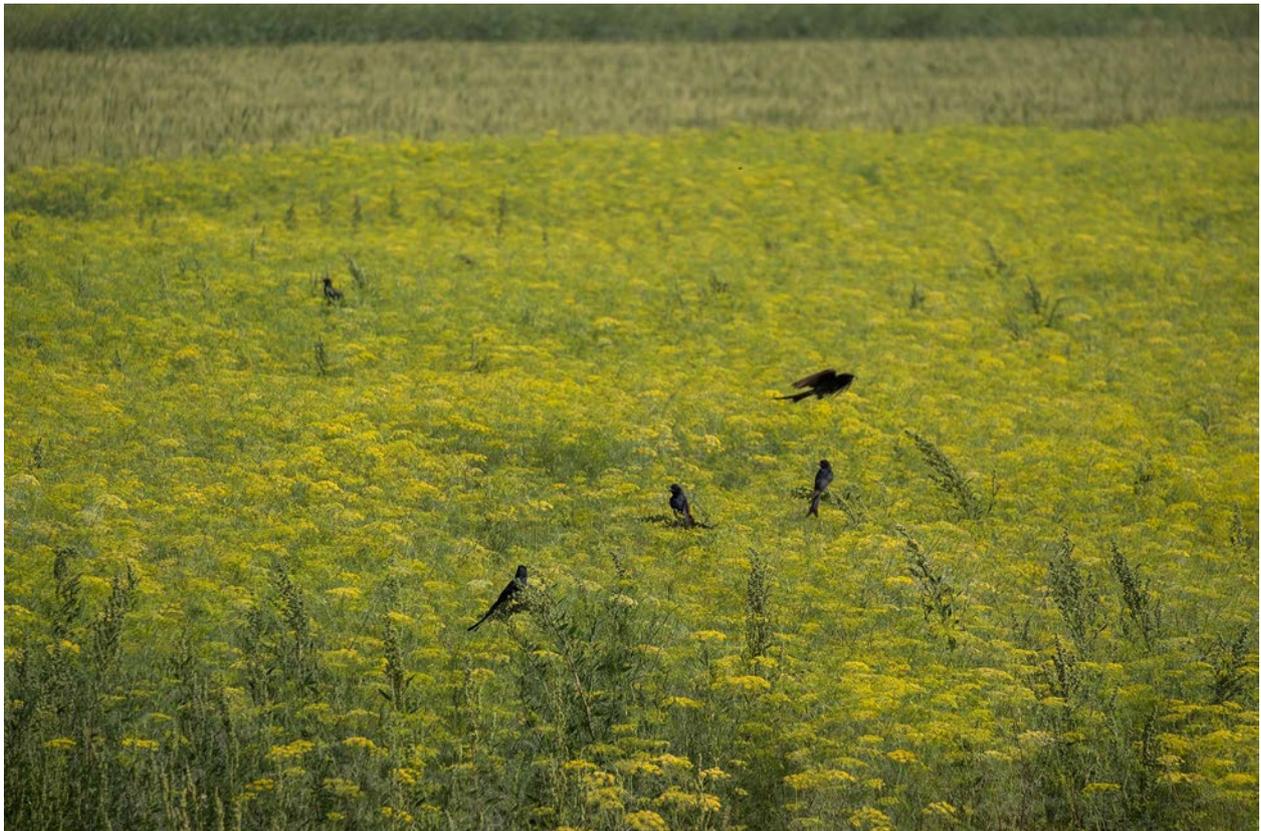


ing each other. There is a small table still free at the back, with even a electricity plugpoint next to it. Surely, there is also internet in this wondrous place, which makes it perfect for me, simply perfect – if only there was no sudden and loud song drowning out everything. That probably comes from a mosque. At that moment it occurs to me that I had forgotten to take off my shoes. Terrified, I look around. Has anyone noticed?

«Mister, mister, you must leave, it's prayer time,» a voice quivers from above. I look up and see the caretaker's henna-hued goatee-beard wiggling over me. He shakes me by the shoulder, looking a bit upset: «Please, you are not allowed here, go now.» I pick up Hebel, which has slipped

to the floor, stuff the camera I am holding in my hand into my backpack, scabble up, and stagger in the direction of the courtyard – where the blazing mid-day sun welcomes me. I cannot see whether the old man is also among the faithful now gathered in large numbers in the pillared forest. At the northern gate, I put my shoes back on, pause for a moment to watch the boy whose dragon is shivering through the sky, and then bravely climb the few steps leading to the honking inferno of Gandhi Road. «In a cafe,» the thought flashes through my mind: «In a cafe that would never have happened to me. Only what?»

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



LOOKING STUPID

Monday, January 29, 2018 – Bagodara (India) Nal Sarovar Link Road

22.703181,72.145592

«Those are very common birds. They fly around everywhere.»

The man must have swum 500 meters through a sea of robust barley ready for harvesting in order to find out why I had my taxi stop, why I got out and walked back to his fields. When he arrived, he was gasping for breath and sweating – as if he was afraid that I would disappear into thin air before he reached me.

«What you do here?» he panted.

«I'm watching these birds,» I said and pointed at a couple of black sparrows sitting in front of us on the blossoming field of dill.

«What's so special about them?»

«How gracefully they hold onto the thin stalks, as if they had no weight at all.»

«All birds can do that.»

«But how lovely it looks, these small black bodies in the radiant sea of yellow through which the green stems shimmer from below, no, flicker almost electrically.»

«There are fields like that everywhere.»

«I know, but this one here, right now, doesn't it look like a sheet of music? The heads that gently sway back and forth with the wind. The stalks the birds are sitting on move differently, slower, more clumsily. It has rhythm. Isn't that a melody?»

I realize that I have overtaxed the man. He probably does not know what a sheet of music is. When he looks at his fields, he is presumably only interested in the plants' stage of maturity or the price per kilogram he will get for his dill or his barley. Now, in many fields one sees farmers who are simply standing around as if they wanted



to watch the plants grow until they are ready for harvesting. They are probably keeping an eye on them so that nothing goes wrong at the last moment. Others are mowing the edges of their plots with a sickle or are cutting out stalks that have already matured.

I realize that I have also overtaxed myself. I do not really see a sheet of music; I do not hear a melody when I look at this «symphony in yellow,» as the spirit of the calendar sheet would probably call this scene. During my journey across India, how often have I already been asked what I am doing at this or that place? How often have I tried to find words that might explain why I am standing here looking stupid? And I have almost always noticed that I do not even really know myself; that I cannot explain, that I have no compelling reasons to

gape at the world here and now. And yet as insufficient as they might be, for me words are the only possibility to maneuver a couple of trubs into the vitreous fluid of experience – buoys along which my thoughts can make their way.

But these words always make for a certain disillusionment. Do they take away the world's magic? In the same way that they sometimes take away art's magic? Is silence perhaps the only thing that befits beholding?

«Okay,» the man suddenly says, tilts his head, and looks out into his vast field. «Okay, I can see the melody.»

Translated from German by Rebecca van Dyck.

The German version of this text has first been published in *ProgrammZeitung*, March 2018, p. 18.



THE FIRST DAY

Sunday, January 1, 2006 – Mumbai (India) Gateway of India

18.921753,72.833556

The water washes up softly against the stones: sleepy, undecided, as if the sea does not quite know how to treat the shore. A mild wind whistles along the edge of the sea, just sufficient to ruffle the feathers of the little sparrows flitting around, chirping quietly, from one algae nest to the next. Far above me a seagull swoops through the sky; closer, bats swing silently through the evening air with strong blows of their jagged wings. On the horizon it is gray upon gray: fishing boats and yachts anchored in gloom, lying noiselessly and patiently in wait of their owners, looking as if they have been forever trapped in this state. A ray of sun directs my gaze to a piece of shiny silver flotsam. Next, as if guided by an invisible hand, the long and curiously bared body of a dead moray glides into the scene. And then the first person appears. It is, how could it

be otherwise, a mussel collector. Slowly, he moves over the dark sea-bed laid bare by the ebbing waters. Utterly focused on the hunt he tip-toes past the small pools, squatting every now and again to carefully loosen a limpet from the pebbles before pushing it into the innards of his plastic bag. Suddenly he raises his head, smiles, waves to me, swings his bag against the sky and shakes the booty proudly. I wave back, but he does not see me. I am not the one meant. Others will eat the limpets with him. I turn around and, in a fraction of a second, the squealing and growling, whimpering and purring, chirping and hissing, croaking and chattering of thousands of human throats jolts me back into the waking world. Hundreds of small transistor radios rattle and rumble the electronic soul out of the body. Two-stroke engines rattle against the crunch



of sugarcane presses. Ice cream vendors are ringing for their lives. Metal spatulas let meat and eggs dance over glowing iron plates: Takatak, takatak, takatak. Pigeons are now swishing up in swarms from the square to the mighty triumphal arch that the British erected here as a symbolic gateway to India a hundred years earlier: a gray explosion in the air, a thunderous applause of wings.

I am at the Gateway of India. My first day on the subcontinent is groaning to an end. I have never seen so many people. I have never been confronted by so much poverty, never seen so much filth, so much visible disease, so many crippled people. Even the huge rats, frolicking between the huts, have their fur falling off in tatters. I've never before

been felt so revolted, never breathed such densely polluted air, never smelled such stench. And, above all, I have never experienced such constant noise, never witnessed such chaos and unrest everywhere, encompassing absolutely everything – shaking up the slumbering definitely, probably even the dead.

Perhaps I do not want to be here at all. Maybe I'm not ready yet. Maybe it's the wrong moment. How frivolous it was to fly to India. I have entered the door to a world about which there was not the faintest inkling in my soul, in my genes. Because none of my ancestors ever travelled so far. And I really do not know if I'm fit to be first.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



GETTING THE HANG OF COLOR

Monday, February 4, 2008 – Ponda (India) Mangeshi Temple

15.445241,73.966936

The idea suddenly flashes through my mind that there must be a connection between Indian minimalism when it comes to applying safety standards and maximalism when using gaudy colors, since color not only means the joy of living but also protection, on the one hand for this life, and on the other for the transition into the next one. This certainly holds true for those colors that one can associate with a Hindu divinity – indeed, consequently for quite a few, as there are a good deal more gods in the Hindu pantheon than numbers on the Pantone color fan.

The two painters at work in front of me on a tower of the Mangeshi temple in Ponda are therefore in twofold danger, because first of all they are standing on a ramshackle stage about fifteen meters above the gateway, and secondly because at the moment they only have a kind of varnish on their brushes, as the

painting of the wall has long since been completed. And: Those who plunge to their death with a colorless brush, hence irreligiously, hardly have a good hand of cards when they are about to be reborn.

In Western Europe there are no gods that regulate the reincarnation traffic; our temples are therefore only guardedly colorful. The only exception that occurs to me is the Cappella del Barolo, which Sol LeWitt painted with stripes and waves in 1999, a colorfully tipsy slap in the pale face of the Piemonte. In the West, we seem to need artists in order to fully get the hang of color. Does one have to conclude that art also constitutes the security gap in our system? One could love it for that reason.

Translated from German by Rebecca van Dyck.

The German version of this text has first been published in *Kunstbulletin* 12/2017, p. 160.





ALL ALONE IN THE CINEMA

Wednesday, March 29, 2017 – from Jagdalpur to Visakapathnam

18.281937,83.001840

When I look at old photographs, a set of dysfunctional cells in my head, which dislike conforming to the rules of reality, end up disorienting me.

The peculiarities of camera technology of a particular epoch in conjunction with the passage of time naturally cause photographs to become slightly blurred, their outlines to become hazy, their colours to fade or turn gaudy. And no matter how natural this process seems to me, I am always swamped by the utterly illogical feeling that these photos were not created by my world, that those days must have indeed been like these pictures: fuzzy, a tad shadowy, grainy, sepia-tone, ilfochrome.

Astonishingly, this defective logic manifests in me not only when I look at photos shot before my time, but also snapshots from my childhood

and youth. Didn't my first love actually have a slightly porous skin? Wasn't my bonanza bike this venomous green? Wasn't my grandmother always a bit out of focus? And her house de facto black-and-white?

The appearance of the air-conditioned compartment of the train I'm taking from Jagdalpur to Vishakapatnam is so yellowed, scratched and tarnished that it looks right out of a vintage photograph. This look is enhanced by the rounded corners edged with aluminum profiles that make the windows look like the images in an old-fashioned photo album decorated with a black, embossed flower tendril or gilt letter. Furthermore, it is dark in my compartment as only the emergency lighting is functioning. I'm also all alone – a rare feat on an Indian Railway train. It is only



now that I realise how very odd that is; since the train set out I have not seen any ticket conductor or other passengers; nor heard the coffee- or chai-wallah, water or vada sellers, who otherwise constantly call through the vestibules. Can it be that I have accidentally boarded a part of the train that is actually being pulled out of service through the countryside?

I am unsurprised by the experience of sitting all on my own in this gloomy cinema evokes feelings akin to those that vintage photographs do. Isn't the

reality, the true picture of India, which I have been travelling through for many weeks now, not always brownish, dusty, and slightly distorted?

In an hour I will be in Visakapathnam. At the latest. Then the world will automatically find its way back to its right colours, and my head will have to apologise for its capricious somersaults. And, if not? What would I be in such a yellowed reality, in sepia tone? And who?

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



«NIMM, DENN ES HAT NOCH, KOMM»

Thursday, March 30, 2017 – Visakapathnam (India) Bavikonda

17.817785,83.390876

At a sedate pace, the bricks glide past my eyes. Soon, a sooty spot drifts into the scene. Then the small crack. After that the whitish semolina that has been pressed by the mortar out of the depths of the masonry into the light. Finally comes the little plant – lonely, green and cheeky – which has found room for its roots in the middle of the world of bricks. For the seventeenth time, it appears to now at the height of my sternum! Or, is it for the eighteenth time?

I have a spiritual shortcoming. And which country is more suitable to make up for the shortfall in one's intellectual coffer than India? I've been wandering, rolling, sailing and flying all over the subcontinent for some months now, but I've never come into contact with anything that might have corrected the imbalance even a tad. No enlighten-

ment, no spiritual awakening, no heartfelt song that would resonate through the veins of my being. Well, it must be said that I'm not looking too seriously for such an experience. But, who knows, perhaps I'll start seeking something. Or am I deceiving myself: Isn't the connection between travel and seeking a cliché?

Here in India I have encountered many Europeans who evidently felt quite differently from me, who had unerringly found something of meaning in the country. I vividly remember a man of my age who had emerged just behind me from the great temple in Kanyakumari with his eyes glowing – no, looking radiant, looking as if they would explode with emotion. He seemed moved, deeply moved, he was trembling with ecstasy. And all I had felt was the need to wash off the oil, sweat,



soot and stale body fluids from my body, and to drink a cold coke.

I try at times to imagine how it would be if I had a guru, a teacher in spiritual matters. Would it be a person whose every word I would lap up, I would trust? How would I be then? Who would I be? The guru and me. Me and the guru. However hard I try, I simply cannot conceive of such a relationship.

But perhaps it does not need to be a guru right at the start. A mantra might well be a efficient start. In the mantra, repetition is essential, and the advantage here is that it is relatively easy, unlike in other practices, to produce mechanically. Moreover, India is the land of repetitions. Certainly. At the museum entrance you are not asked simply for your ticket, but asked for it at least twice: «Ticket! Ticket!» Photography is not just forbidden, it's: «No photo! No photo! No photo, sir!» In the meantime, I introduce myself consistently with a shortened but doubled version of my name — though that has never prompted anyone to believe I should be called Samsam. Or maybe it has?

But even a mantra is not something you can simply invent. It has to be «handed over» to you (uttered into your ear) in an act of initiation, as

it were. And this act already represents something like a small awakening — or at least it is a story. There's this legend about the poet Kabir (1440–1518), whom no teacher wanted to take under his wings as his origins were not entirely flawless. So, one morning Kabir defiantly lay down on one of the steps leading down from the Ghats to the Ganges in Varanasi. When Swami Ramananda, one of the most revered gurus of the time, came down the steps to take his morning bath in the sacred river, he stumbled over the young man and was so startled that he involuntarily uttered «Rama, Rama», his personal mantra that was a double invocation of Vishnu's seventh incarnation — which was thus inadvertently passed on to Kabir. This «handing over» of the mantra may have been the result of a clever ploy on Kabir's part, but there is no doubt that Kabir was not only worthy of being given a mantra, but also becoming a disciple of Ramananda.

The mantra I like best is the famous «Om Mani Padme Hum» of the Tibetan Buddhists. The reason is simple. Years ago, in a temple in Guangzhou, southern China, I bought — just for a lark — a little brown plastic box etched with the lotus-motif, which reproduced exactly that mantra in endless



repetitions at the touch of a button, humming with dark female voices, which worked as a sort of balm on my soul – my father was very ill at the time and my mind was in turmoil. For a long time the small box stood in my spice rack and I played the mantra to all my guests – for fun, of course. Until the day the battery, hidden deep in the bowels of the device, went kaputt – and given that changing or recharging the battery was out of the question, the repetition came to an end.

A mantra you have purchased in a temple shop is not exactly a story you would entrust to your biographer first. Even less would I tell him that the Om mani padme hum always sounded like a sentence to me, which my mother used to repeat at the table, and which I have to repeat here in Swiss German for the sake of the right tone: «Nim, denn es het no, kum» («Take some, because there's still, come on»).

Now the literal meaning only plays a subordinate role in a mantra. «Om mani padme hum» means something with lotus and jewel (the experts argue about the exact meaning). More decisive are the sound and the power, the spiritual depth of the mantra.

One has to effort a lot if he wants to spiritually transcend the literal meaning of «Nim, denn es het

no, kum». At best one could let the sentence pass as a mantra for the capitalism of our days. But of course I don't want to repeat such a slogan. Nevertheless, it is a fact that this mantra has fallen to me. Can I really just ignore it?

The ruins of the Buddhist monastery of Bavikonda lie on a hill above the beach of Rushikonda, north of Visakhapatnam. From the 3rd century BCE onwards the complex was inhabited by some 150 monks for about half a millennium, then abandoned, and archaeologically excavated in the 1980s. Bavikonda is famous for a small bone found in an urn, which is believed to be a piece of the Buddha. The complex is scrupulously clean, extremely well-maintained, and of free access to visitors. Nevertheless, I am the only visitor at the site. The taxi driver, who is to take me back to the city later, cleans the windows of his Suzuki Dzire. And the gardener, a tiny little man who seems to all skin, is watering a hedge at the entrance. I wonder if he lives in the thatched hut on the fringe of the grounds?

I am unobserved and can try it again. A stupa is basically nothing more than architecture that embodies the act of repetition. I pick the biggest stupa and start to move slowly circumambulate it in a



clockwise direction. At first I say, «Om mani pad-me hum», but it seems terribly artificial to mutter a formula that I do not really understand. So, after the third round, I go over to my own mantra, «Nim, denn es het no, kum; nim, denn es het no, kum.» I circle the stupa 36 times as my mantra consists of six syllables and the repetition wants to be embedded in repetition.

While walking I lose my orientation momentarily. Where is the Bay of Bengal again? Where is the city? And in what kind of blur is my taxi waiting? I do not know what to focus on after a few rounds. And my left eye starts to twitch slightly. I feel the wind, which seems to be warmer on one side of the stupa than on the other. I notice that the piping of the birds changes during my circumambulations – and then repeated. I would not de-

scribe my condition as a trance, at most I'd admit to feeling a slight confusion. Afterwards, I feel a bit dizzy. Above all, I'm monstrously hungry and my stomach growls so violently that even a German mastiff would run away from me.

In no circumstances will I describe it as a spiritual experience. And anyone who is familiar with such things is bound to tell me that I'd have to do at least $6 \times 36 \times 36$ rounds – just as a preparation. Nevertheless, the couple of circumambulations I've made have had some impact. I can at most compare it – certainly inappropriately – with the effect that a bottle of red wine usually has on me: a tender caress on my otherwise sporty mind.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



THE FIRST TIME

Wednesday, January 11, 2017 – Ankola (India) Railway Station

14.643484,74.334808

Those on the road experience many first times – sometimes more than they would like. This first time, however, was something special: spectacular in a most unspectacular way. It happened in a third-class compartment on the train journey from Margao to Udipi. The train had been standing for an eternity at some boon-dock of a station in the midday heat. The fans on the ceiling were running at maximum speed and blowing an ear-pumping vortex of air into the oppressive coach, but did not succeed in cooling it. I was lounging on the fake leather-padded seat, a folded computer on my knees, and gradually my eyes began to droop. As I was sinking into sleep, my half-closed eyes registered that the doorway was suddenly a splash of colour. A turquoise sari-clad woman pushed past me, an old woman, visibly exhausted from nego-

tiating the short path from the platform to the compartment. She sank down next to me with a relieved sigh and pulled the small glasses off her face. I smiled at her – in a friendly, encouraging way. But without her glasses on, she could not recognise my expressions. And, even as I was smiling at her fatigued face, I realised that my view of this land had changed – that I had undergone an attitudinal transformation. I had met many old women during my journeys across the subcontinent. What was brand-new here was that I was now simply regarding the stranger by my side as a tired woman, an old woman – and not as an old Indian woman.

That was about an hour ago, I reckon. The train continues to be at a stand-still in the blazing sun. The fans have resigned from their job. The lights on the ceiling of the coach have conked out.



The old woman has lain down on one of the long seats and is breathing softly. A soft light streams in through the train's windows, making the woman's sari glitter and bringing a bronzed glow to her skin. She looks much less aged now than she did earlier, her body seems firmer, youthful almost. Is it the same woman? I had nodded off for a bit. Had someone else taken her place while I was slumbering? Was she rejuvenated while I was sleeping? Or, has my view of her changed? Am I not awake yet? Or, conversely, did the old woman appear earlier only in my dream?

I lean against the window, close my eyes, and feel the sweat running from my forehead down over the bridge of my nose to my lips. It tastes salty,

a bit like freshly dug up earth and a bit like yeast, like a white bread that is not quite baked through. Can it be that a few tears are mingled with the sweat? Why tears?

It does not matter if I have actually experienced or merely dreamed the scene with the old woman. Just like that, I've lost some of my distance from the world. And, suddenly, I understand how much that changes. It means that this is a journey of no return – no return into that, that was.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.

The German version of this text has first been published in *ProgrammZeitung*, May 2018, p. 19.



HIGH ABOVE THE LITTLE GOD

Thursday, January 12, 2017 – Udupi (India) Sri Krishna Matha

13.341001,74.752406

He stands above the temple roofs in perfect equilibrium – quite as if he's ensconced on firm ground. The wall of the dome, the crown on which he's king, consists of thousands of scraps of cloth fluttering in the mild breeze that blows all the time from the ocean through the city of Udupi. The spherical crest itself is bare and, as such, reminiscent of a globe bearing latitudinal and longitudinal lines. I am reminded of Atlas, the most tragic figure in Greek mythology, the personification of bondage – and I smile at the fanciful thought that he could, at long last, have shrugged off the weight of the celestial heavens and taken rebirth in the form of the nubile Indian youth standing up there.

The dome stands on a temple cart, a wooden wagon, which is four or five metres tall and decorated all over with figures. I especially like the dif-

ferent fruits dangling like earrings on this unique wagon: banana-trees, jackfruit, pineapple and cashew. Four workers are busy cleaning the wooden facade of the cart with paintbrushes and compressed air guns, others are smearing grease into the spokes of its mammoth wheels studded with heavy metal, tightening screws on the chassis, and polishing its brass fittings.

Three such temple carts stand in the square, towering over the other buildings here in the sacred heart of the city. They remind me of fantastic montgolfiers, and how they might have flown away from a fairy tale or a dreamy manga. The domes also contain life-sized wooden figures, whose heads are carefully covered with jute sacks. They will probably not show their faces until evening, when hundreds of people will pull



the towering, multiple-tonne wagons with thick ropes through the streets.

Probably hiding behind the bags are figures who are related, in one way or another, to Lord Krishna, the deity to which this grand temple is dedicated. In Udupi everything revolves around this image (*murti*) of Lord Krishna in his infant avatar (Balakrishna). The image is believed to have been found and consecrated at this spot by the Vaishnavite saint, Shri Madhavacharya, in the 13th century – during the time of the January full moon (which, by coincidence, happens to be lighting up the skies right now). Ever since then, the annual temple cart festival (*rath yatra*) has been celebrated

at this time of year with pomp. Just after sunset this evening there will be a solemn procession, powered by drums (*tavil*), oboes (*nadaswaram*), firecrackers including flaming rockets. With his depositing of the image of Balakrishna in this temple precinct, Madhavacharya established not only one of India's most important pilgrimage sites, but also the famous cuisine of Udupi. Because Balakrishna, according to his devotees, has got to be spoiled with all sorts of culinary delicacies, otherwise the temple might just bite the dust. Eight monasteries, the Ashta Mathas, take care, by turn, of the physical well-being of the boy-god – by giving him daily offerings of food (*prasad*) and service (*seva*).

Whatever the godling leaves on his plate after his meals is given to the believers. Pilgrims, who have come from far and near to see the deity, are served, free of charge, in the temple at noon and in the evening. Of course, Balakrishna is a spoiled brat who wants to be pampered with new treats time and again. The monastery cooks have taken pains over the centuries to develop a diverse food plan – which is purely vegetarian and devoid of onion and garlic (taboo as they are believed to boost sensual pleasure). Over the years, the pilgrims have taken the Udupi kitchen to their homelands and



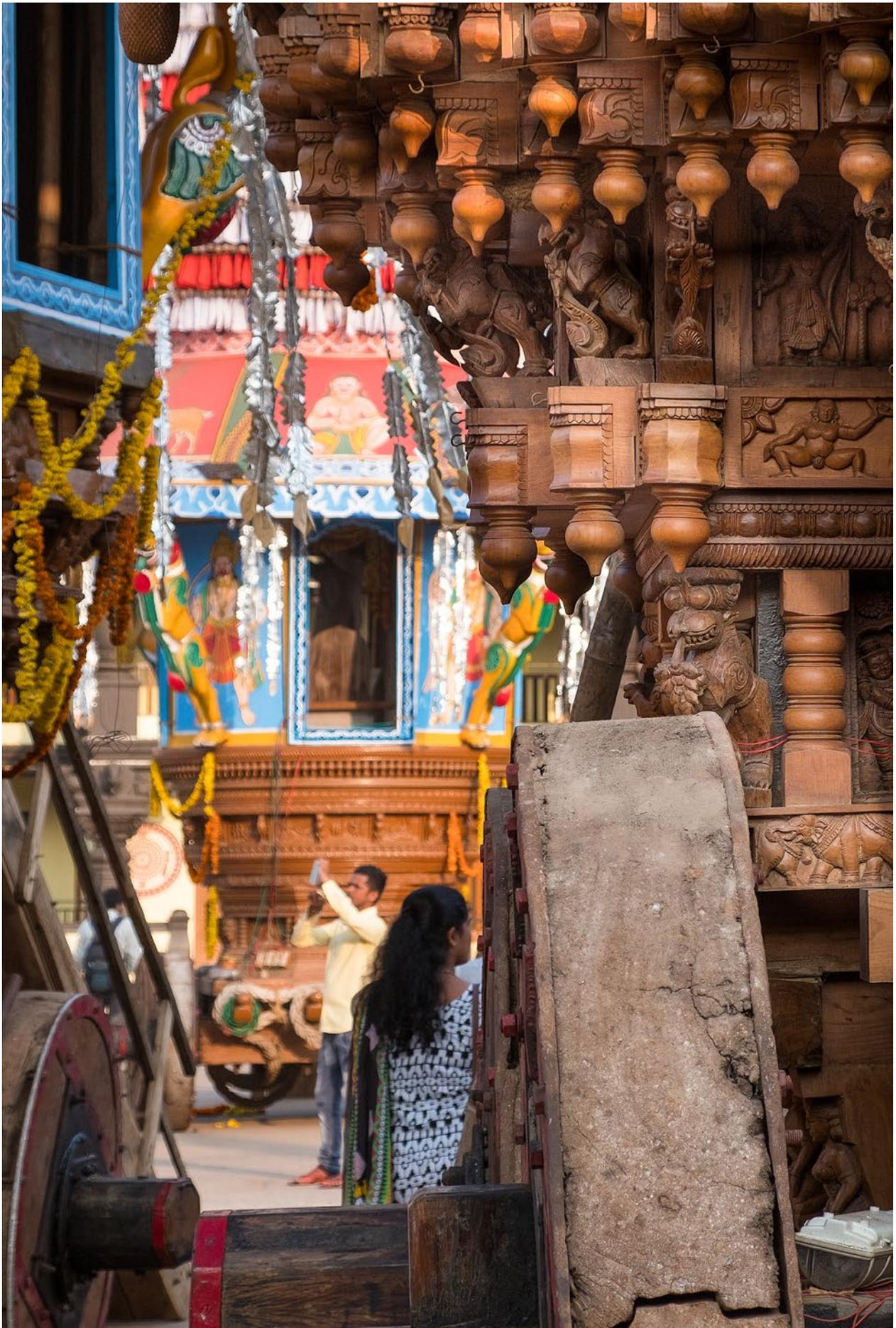
canny local businessmen have taken the cuisine to the rest of India and in recent decades to the world. Today, there is hardly an Indian city which does not boast of at least one Udupi restaurant.

This morning, much too early, the voice of a child singing roused me from my slumber -- the bright and clear and pure voice of a young boy (whose voice has not yet broken) singing had resounded through loudspeakers over the rooftops of the temple district. The voice and the subsequent litany (which may well have emanated from a tape-recorder) probably held the believers in thrall for an hour. Unwelcome though the singing was at that hour to slumbrous non-pilgrims like me, the notes impacted me in a strange way. As soon as I woke up, I wobbled off, as if I were remote-controlled, to the Mitra Samaja – a restaurant in the temple complex that has been run for generations by the same Bramahn family. There, I ordered an infinitely sweet, ghee-soaked pineapple ksheera with cashew nuts, which I proceeded to spoon hungrily into my mouth. Those who know that I never have breakfast – and definitely never eat something that is fatty and sugary – may be quick to believe that the sweet-toothed Krishna had seduced me with his honeyed songs. But it can well



be that my somewhat emaciated body (weakened by a serious bout of diarrhoea a few days earlier) needed a whole new calorie intake. I must say it was an moment of unexpected happiness, which I cannot describe, really, and which I will probably never repeat.

The young man in heaven is now trying, together with a colleague on the ground and another halfway up, to bring a garland into position. Their endeavours do not succeed, the rope gets tangled up over and over again, then gets torn and goes into free fall three-four times through the air before finally collapsing like a cobra whose head has been cut off. As if that were an omen, all the workers





descend from the Montgolfiere. It is almost lunch-time and the sun is bouncing bright and hot. The men push their tools under the wagon and leave.

Only Atlas does not wish to leave his place. With his legs outstretched he stands there proudly, looking intently into the Krishna Temple, where pilgrims are gathering in the large hall on the first floor for the first round of luncheon: rice, sambar, rasam, and two laddus per person; a very modest variant of the rich Udupi diet. But special enough, given that it is served by brahmins wearing the sacred thread (*yajnopavita*) around their chests – and what the highest caste serves, all the lower castes can eat. From his position, the young man certainly also looks down into the temple-owned cowshed, where the animals obviously suffer at the hands of

their brutal guards. Even the roof of the holiest of sanctums, where the tiny figure of baby Krishna poses inside a dim and musty shrine awaiting his devotees, lies directly at his feet. Suddenly, something seems to electrify him, and his still, upright body begins to curl into a curve. He stares spellbound at the temple. Has he seen something? Has he heard something? Or has he just realised that he has risen far above the little god? Atlas recovers from his momentary trance, straightens, puts his hands together in front of his chest, bows deeply, and lingers for a few moments. Then he hops off his ball like a monkey, dives boldly into the dome, and is gone.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.





Sunday, Juli 23, 2017

TOO MUCH OF THE TOURIST

Saturday, July 22, 2017 – Bangalore (India) Rhenius Street

12.961871,77.601471

Blame it on the white chocolate. No bar there. But that is of no comfort to me as I now sit, holding an 80-year-old lady in my arms, on the petrol fume-ridden rim of the road-divider the Bangalore city council has built in the middle of two-lane Rhenius Street to discipline traffic a bit – or, shall we say, to reduce the number of frontal collisions. It is ten o'clock in the evening. On the left, tuk-tuks rattle past us at top speed. To the right, cars and buses shoot out of the dark of the dimly lit street to disappear again into the night. Their headlamps strike our faces like light sabers, but Kumudini doesn't seem to notice. She keeps her eyes closed and breathes in irregular gasps.

Kumudini is the mother of my old travelling companion and translator, Gunvanthi. She

lives in a house in Richmond Town, less than 200 yards from the spot at which we are sitting. I worshipped Kumudini from the moment we met. That was almost a dozen years back, and time has not diminished my admiration. Kumudini is a dignified lady, who has been able to preserve the over-blown charm of a young princess. She can be unruly, imperious, sometimes a tad impatient, and occasionally dismissive. This is especially noticeable to her daughter and her female staff. Kumudini loves men and I am one of her knights, her princes, for whom she is happy to discard her thorny mantel to show off her smart, most charming and generous side.

As night fell, I strolled with Kumudini and Gunvanthi to the Hockey Club, about 300 yards

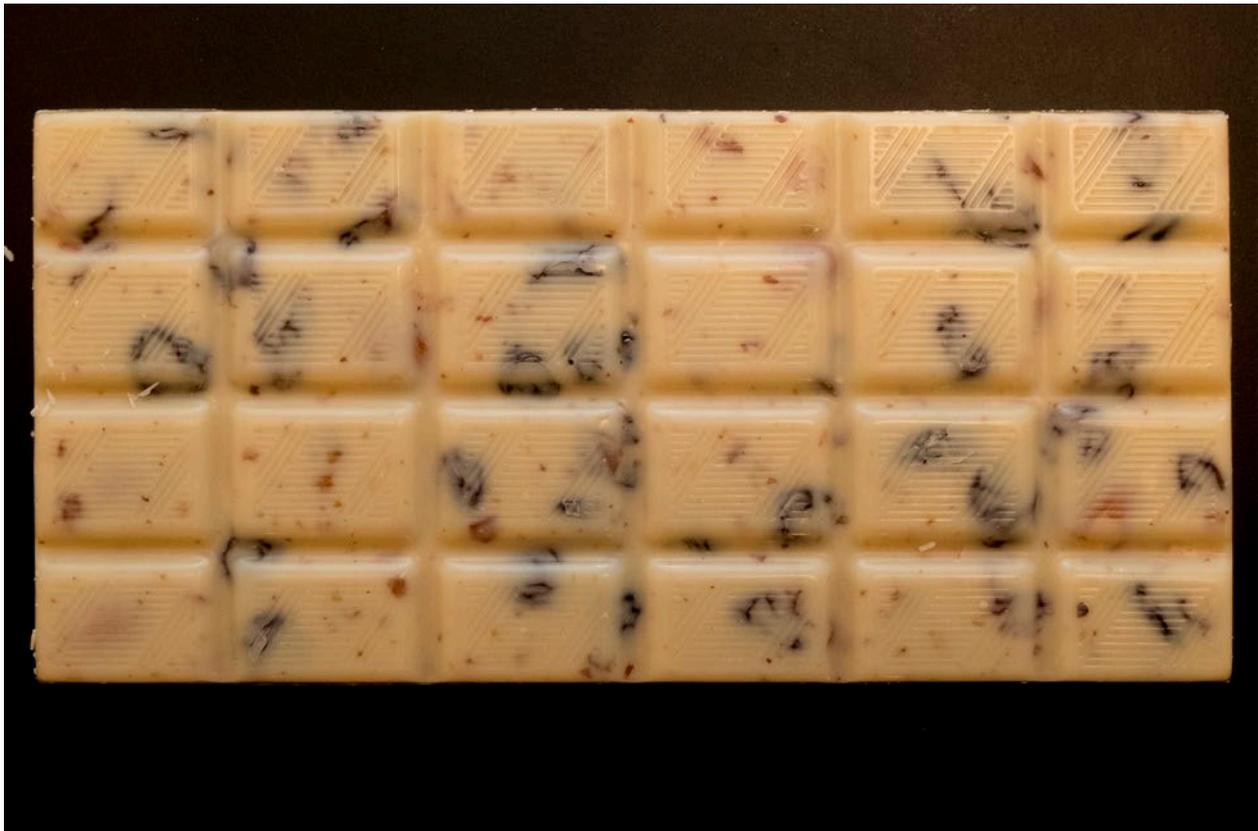


from the mother's house – a distance for which the old lady did not want to summon her driver although she's not sturdy on foot nowadays. Gunvanthi is a member of the club, not because she plays hockey (she has never tried it to my knowledge), but because you can sit on a well-kept lawn by the tree-lined walls of the club and drink beer or whisky cola – unmolested by hawkers and traders and begging children. Kumudini, whose normal diet is rice with vegetables, rasam, sambar and yogurt, ate a plateful of fried baby corn at first and then of paneer tikka, and washed them down with a large Kingfisher beer. Her eyes lit up and she developed the smug and vaguely mischievous expression of a person who knows that true pleasure is hard to come by with modest means. It was dark in the garden of the club; with the aid of a flash, I took a few pictures of Kumudini in the spooky light. We enjoyed ourselves royally.

Then it was time to go home – and to return the old lady to the care of her housemaid and the cool peace of her rooms. While Gunvanthi was paying the bill, which can be a bit complicated and take a bit of time in such clubs, Kumudini and I started walking slowly out of the

club. We stepped out of the gates into Rhenius Street, and squeezed our way through the narrow gap between closely parked cars to cross the road. A motorcycle thundered so close to us that I felt the driver's knee on my pants. I put my right arm around Kumudini's shoulder and pulled her over to the road divider in the middle of the road. Then, with a bang and loud honk, a second motorbike shot past us. Kumudini winced and I sensed that something had happened in her body that suddenly seemed to have no tension whatsoever. She could not take another step. I hurriedly half-carried the swooning lady to the road divider and helped her sit down. As soon as we were seated Kumudini collapsed and her head drooped forward. I pulled her up a little, leaned her upper body against my chest and called her by name. She did not respond.

Years earlier, I had held her like that in my arms. That had been on Schönbüel, in the middle of the Swiss Alps. I had persuaded her to take the chairlift with me. It had been a premiere in her life. At first she was terrified, but then she took rapturous delight in the flight over the landscape. And now, was this going to be our last adventure together? Crossing a road in Bangalore? I tried to



turn around so that I could grab her wrist without letting her slip onto the street. To my surprise, I felt a pulse and, at that very moment, life came back into her body. She sat up groaning a little and I heard her gastric contents shoot up. I pushed her upper body a bit to the side, so that it did not ruin her sari. She proceeded to puke in three or four big bilges – it was a surprisingly bright vomit – and my attempt to preserve the sari was only partially successful.

I remembered at that second that, in the late afternoon, Kumudini had gobbled up a whole slab of white chocolate – standing, in haste, in greed. I had brought her twenty chocolate bars from Switzerland: all but one were of the dark variety. The lady had opted to go first for the sole white chocolate, the *Tourist* made by Frey, with raisins, almonds and hazelnuts. It had been one of my grandmother's favourite chocolates, and Grandma would always have one in her handbag on every trip: Frey, as if the brand name were the order of the day. The peculiar aroma of the *Tourist*, which has little to do with real chocolate, is closely bonded in my memory to my earliest trips to central Switzerland, to Lungern below Schönbüel, where my grandparents had a holiday chalet. And, yes,

that's the reason I had wanted to bring Kumudini a slab of it.

For one used to the light diet of south India, a *Tourist* can be quite a challenge – as you can see. And then come fried baby corn strips, paneer cubes and beer and, for dessert, an acoustic punch in the pit of the stomach...! Well, here we are, the old lady and me. She is too weak to get up, her eyes are firmly closed. I'm afraid I cannot let her go, that she's going to fall headlong into the street, into the pool of vomit at her feet. I do not want to force her to do anything, force anything in fact, so we just sit there, tormented by the headlights flashing past...

Finally, two young men notice we are in trouble. They ask if they can help. I describe Kumudini's condition, explain. They stop a tuk-tuk, describe, explain, gesticulate. We lift Kumudini into the back seat, seconds later we are in front of her house. The security guard of the building helps me bring Kumudini to her apartment door. The domestic help opens the door, Gunvanthi is already there, full of concern, in the dark she had walked past us in the street without noticing us. We bring Kumudini



to her bed. She speaks again. It's all quite uncomfortable for her. I leave her to her girls. While leaving the apartment, I see that there is a slab of Galak on her dresser, of which a chunk is missing. I cannot remember if I bought her

another pack of white chocolate. For a moment, I consider taking it away. But then I remember the glint in Kumudini's eyes – and let it be.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



THE STRANGE GOD IN ME

Monday, 24 July, 2017 – Auroville (India) Matrimandir

12.005446,79.810341

I close my eyes a little, and the world before me turns into a blurry mush with golden pearls in the centre. This then is how a frog can see the lotus blooming in the middle of the pond – at least in my imagination. I do not know anything about frogs, but I like to ponder about them. Because no other animal hops with such naturalness, at least as I see it, onto a leaf; none jumps with such confidence into the next life situation. I often wish that I could be exactly as human a human as a frog is a frog.

I am sitting on a comfortable stone, shaded by a vast raintree and refreshed by a breeze that rustles my shirt gently every now and again. On my right, two young Italians are sitting cross-legged on the ground, their hands relaxed in their laps, their eyes closed. On my left, sits a teenaged Indian cou-

ple, stealing shy glances at each other, waiting for romance to spark; not knowing how to proceed, probably hoping someone will take the initiative and tell them what to do. Before me, Auroville's holiest of holies glistens in the sun: The Matrimandir – named after the «Mother» and founder of the ideal city, which was established in 1968 a few kilometres north of Pondicherry. Mirra Alfassa, to use her real name, came to Pondicherry in 1914 for the first time. Here she met the philosopher and yogi Sri Aurobindo. In 1920 she settled down in his ashram and took over the leadership of the organisation. She eventually selected a nearby tract of land, meant for the creation of Auroville, by simply finding a spot on a map with her finger, which was guided by sheer inspiration. The Matrimandir is meant to express what Auroville aspires to be:



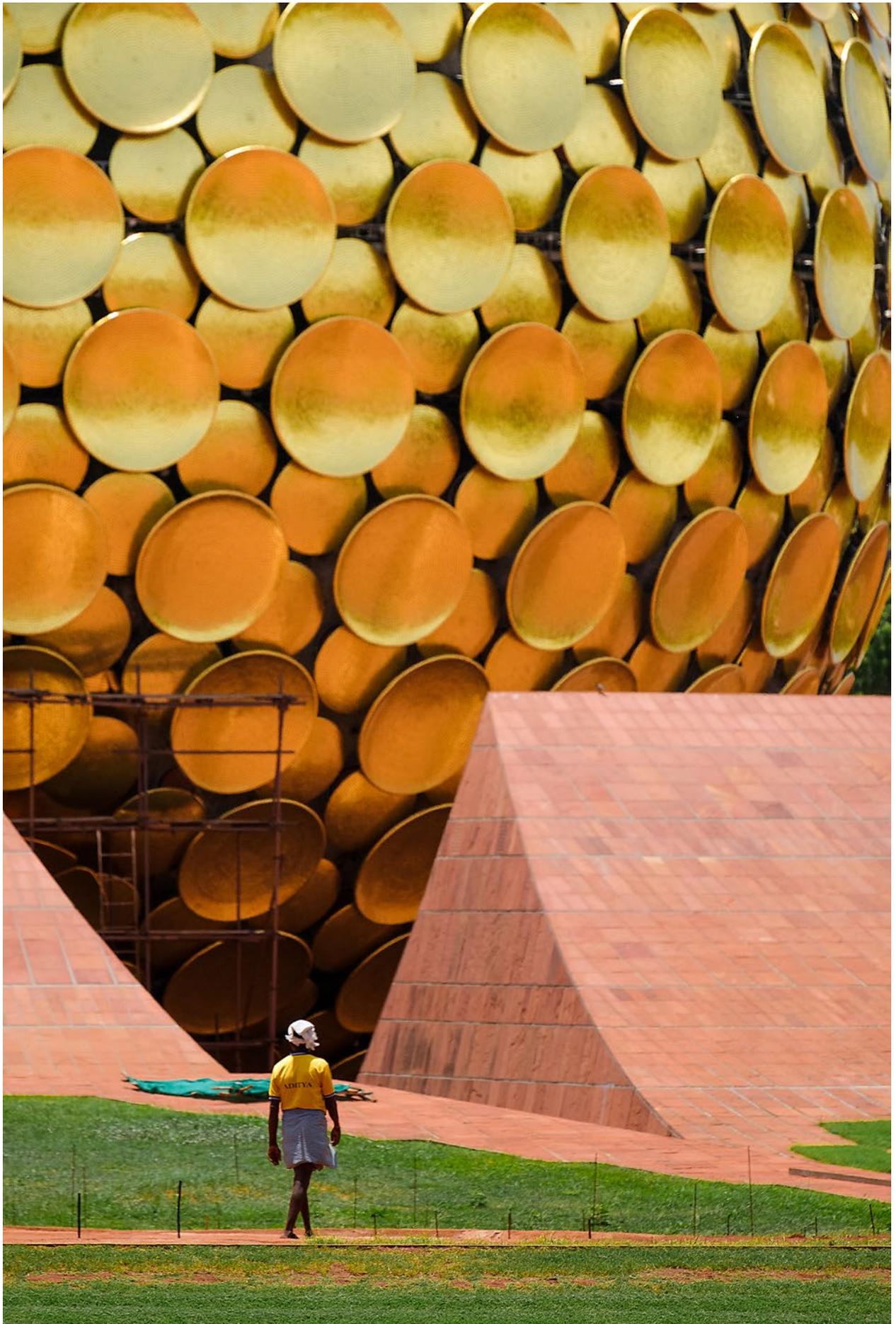
a universal city in which men and women of all countries move beyond all faiths and live together in peace and «progressive harmony». Auroville is actually less like a city and more like a conglomeration of small villages, scattered farms and houses. The Matrimandir serves as its meditation centre. The temple is inaccessible to outsiders, but visitors can see it from a viewing platform.

To get into the mood, I read the little book I bought at the Visitors' Centre in Auroville. In it M. P. Pandit explains to novices the practice of Integral Yoga, the way to «holistic spirituality». Pandit lived in the Aurobindo Ashram for fifty years, and was long-time personal secretary to Mirra Alfassa. He speaks of a «divine consciousness» that is located «in the heart of our heart» – and calls the «deification of our nature» the central goal of human endeavour. Such statements are somewhat familiar to me – and that has to do with the fact that such ideas were widespread in Europe during my youth. In the seventies and eighties, for example, there was hardly a record of rock or pop music that did not convey a spiritual message. I grew up with such ideas, so to speak, and I absorbed them, so to say, with the first worldmilk. At the same time Pandit's sentences

are also foreign to me – because in all my life I have never felt anything within me that could be even remotely considered «divine». So, if a god resides in the sanctum sanctorum of my heart, as Pandit notes, he can only be a strange devil to me.

«The divine is something for the advanced,» is an line that flashes through my mind. Of course, I do not believe that there are people who are fundamentally more advanced than others. Or are there? «In any case, I cannot count myself among the advanced ones,» the thought whirls in my head. «I am over 50, but I still do not know what existence is all about.»

I am amazed at my thoughts. I am amazed at the sentences that go through my mind. Essentially, they mean that I do not believe in Pandit's construct. But I am loath to admit that straight-away. Perhaps that has something to do with the fact that a part of me regrets not having access to spiritual things. Another part, however, wonders rebelliously how adult humans can believe in such nonsense. Pandit speaks of «fundamental, eternal, truth-based values that hold for all time.» I want to be as human a human as a frog is a frog. That's my fundamental truth. And that's why I close my eyes to throw another look at the obvious.



«Everybody is a mixture of some qualities that contain the heritage of the animal past and some that are seeds of a more divine future,» writes Pandit, outlining the prime objective of silencing the animal within us. But I have nothing against the animal in me; on the contrary I would like it if it surfaced a bit more often. I would like to nurture the tendency rather than destroy it. And I would be only too happy to counter Pandit's lofty words with wild, rebellious sentences such as: «The frog in me is God!»

According to Pandit, everything that is connected with the «desire-ego» is animalistic – and this requires to be eradicated. And, if we desire to find the «higher energy» within us, «egoism, self-aggrandizement, selfishness, greed, anger, violence, passion and their ilk must be rejected.» To vanquish the «desire ego», he recommends cultivating emotions that oppose it: «Incomprehension must be replaced by generosity, anger by forgiveness, hatred by love, and so on.» It's about making the right choice. «To choose the hard way and to come closer to the divine, or to opt for the easier way and slide down the ladder of evolution, animal-wards.»

Pandit's advice on how to become a higher being are holistic in every respect. They affect all aspects of life, encompass the entire universe and apply to all 24 hours of the day. His tips are detailed and concrete. In his fourth chapter, for example, he devotes himself to sleep and recommends: «Lie on your left side.» Above all: «Do not sleep on your back. This is the wrong position. It hinders the natural digestive process, puts pressure on the kidneys. And, in men, this is the most favourable position for wet dreams.» Again the frog in me hops into the air, up in arms – because I love wet dreams and

am only too willing to let them enchant my nights, as well as my days.

I am very likely a hopeless case, though: one who is perhaps trapped also during the day in the «wrong position» and therefore prone to doing inappropriate things. Sitting near the Visitors' Centre in the Right Path Café, which offers international snacks made from locally grown organic ingredients, I notice the tormented faces of many sitting next to their rolled-up yoga mats, spooning broccoli quiche or dosa with sambar into their mouths. There are more people here with morose faces, I think, than for example in a shopping centre. Does that mean that shopping makes you happier than yoga does? Can it be that the human soul finds consumption-triggered intoxication sweeter and more digestible than the «inflow» of «future» higher consciousness?

Clearly, such ideas thrive in my head and lead me to invariably stray from the right path. I'm probably one of those people Pandit warns his followers about: «There are those who wallow in an atmosphere that impairs spiritual pursuit. In words or in other ways they create doubts, trigger strong imbalances [...]. You must be vigilant and avoid the company of such people. Then, there are those who are akin to vampires; they suck out your vitality and leave you weak and exhausted. In conversation they may be interesting, but ultimately they induce fatigue. You must make it a rule to stay away from them.»

I do not want to be a vampire. The frog in me just says «hmm» and is all set to jump onto the next leaf. But then, all of a sudden, I am seized by uncertainty: Is what the frog sees glowing in the depths of the pond really a lotus flower?

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



IN THE SUSPENDED GONDOLA

Wednesday, July 26, 2017 – from Madurai to Rameswaram (India)

(9.282713,79.197974)

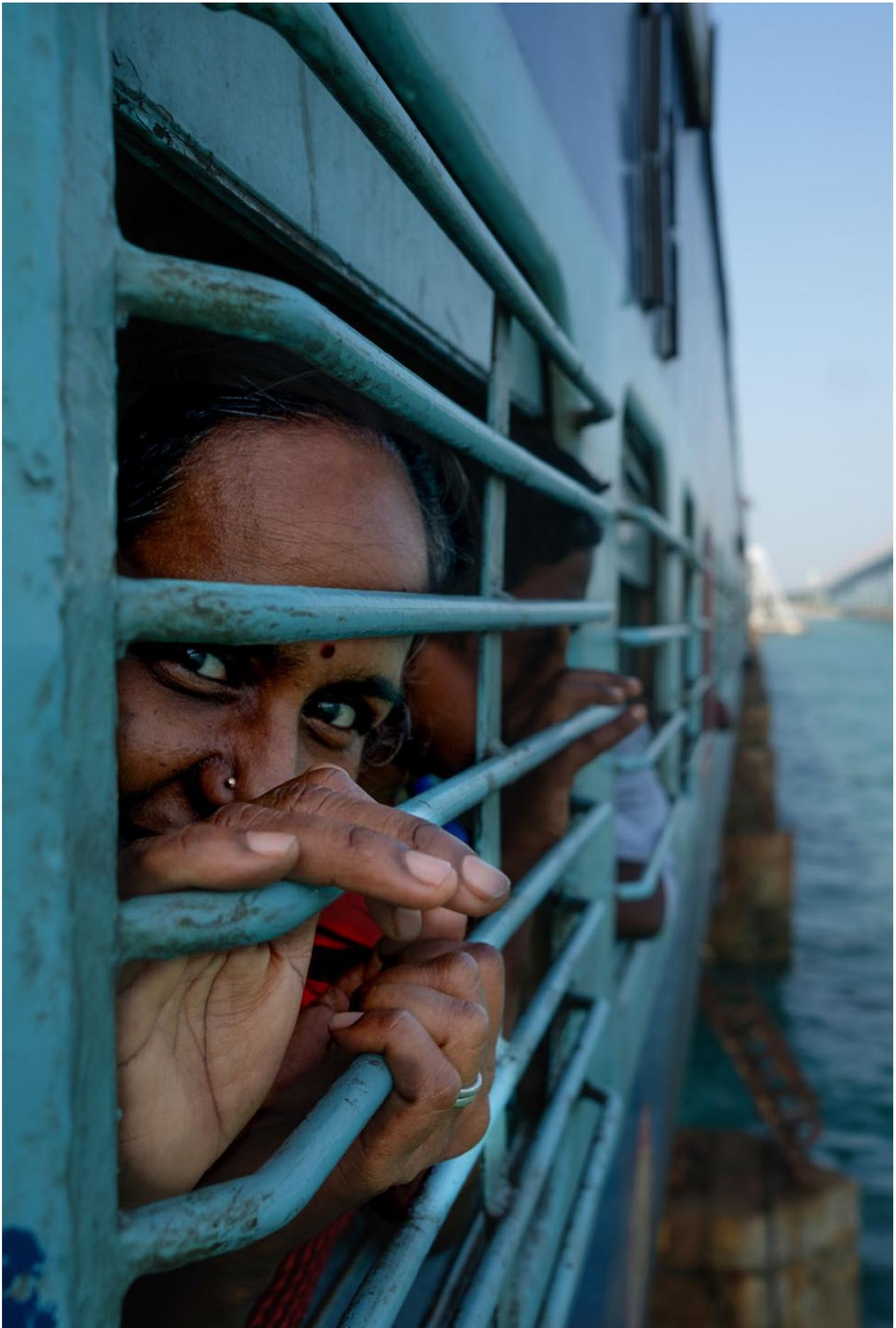
Shortly after passing Mandapam, the train slows down from 40 to 30 km/h, to 20, to 10 km/h, and finally glides over the rails at walking pace, hooting loudly every few seconds. The family, with whom I have shared the compartment from Madurai onwards, begins to get impatient. They press their heads against the bars of the windows to see what's going on outside. Even the delicate-looking mother, who has been looking at me curiously throughout the ride without ever making eye-contact with me, is now holding onto the window-bar and staring out into the tracks. Only the youngest, an infant swaying gently in the improvised little cloth-hammock tied across two berths by his aunt, continues to doze peacefully.

I step out to the entrance area to see what the excitement is all about – and I find that the wagon appears to be flying. When I stick my head out of the

door – which almost always remains open in Indian trains – I see that there's no more ground under the chassis on either side and that the running boards end in nothingness and, far below them, the waves of the sea are churning curls of spinach-green. The Pamban Bridge is so narrow that the heavy train has turned into a floating air-gondola, as it were.

When I point my camera lens at the floating iron to shoot a photograph of it, I see through the lens that the mother is looking directly at me from inside the coach in a friendly, affectionate way – it's a fleeting connect between her and me. A moment later there's a wail, followed by laughter. The infant has woken up, has freed himself from his hammock, and is doing a full striptease, revealing his little member with a glorious chuckle.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.





THE SILENT BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Friday, July 28, 2017 – Kanadukathan (India) Raja Front Street

10.175334,78.779169

India is renowned for its vivid colours: the red saris of its brides, of the curries made with Kashmiri chillies, the orange robes of the devotees of Shiva, the fluorescent blue of Lord Krishna, the golden-yellow glow on the faces of the women or in a pot of biryani. The blaze of colours matches the explosive effect of the honking and hooping that sets the tone on its streets.

All these screaming colours have silent brothers and sisters, one discovers as one moves closer to the ground, with many of them having been muted by time. In the village of Kanadukathan, for instance, where the erstwhile Rajas of Chettinad resided in brightly painted palaces, the hues are faded. So are the homes themselves of these merchants, who travelled from here far into East Asia and brought home not only wealth, but also exotic spices, kitch-

en techniques, and a special cuisine. The houses are either sealed or have only a small portion occupied – and their walls hold infinite variations of brown, gray and faded red.

As I stroll through the village, the skies over the houses turn leaden and a huge thunderstorm comes into play. The light in the heavens, although devoid of direction and illuminatory quality, manages somehow to make the earth and dirt tones glimmer – thereby creating a moment of peculiar beauty. It is not a beauty that promises happiness that transcends the everyday, or celebrates the moment by prophesying its decay. It is a beauty that moves me deeply perhaps because of all that it is not.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.





TO LET YOURSELF FALL

Saturday, 29 July, 2017 – Madurai (India) Meenakshi Temple

9.918922,78.119324

Suddenly, I understand what a temple is. I had entered the sacred Sri Meenakshi Sundareshwara Temple Precinct through the east gate and crossed a long hall in which, apart from sacred and sacrificial offerings and various types of religious bells and whistles, a range of plastic toys were also being sold – mostly weapons ranging from the ancient scimitar to machine guns used by the Indian Army to the futuristic bubble pistol in the form of a half-sunk puffer fish.

I had crossed porticos enclosing the holiest areas. The Holy of Holies, the sanctum of the goddess Meenakshi (an avatar of Parvathi), with her three breasts and her beautiful «fish eyes» (*meen* means *fish* in Tamil), is accessible only to Hindus. So also the shrine that houses her bridegroom, Lord Shiva (called Sundareshwara here), in whose grand cos-

mic dance Meenakshi lost not only her composure but also her «superfluous» breast. I had counted all the lingams standing, warmed by special towels, in small chapels. And gazed at countless images of demons, even while making sure I did not stumble over any of the many believers prostrating in front of the shrines. I had admired the colourfully designed ceilings of the halls, with their patterns painted in near-fluorescent colours, which lent the otherwise gloomy rooms something light, friendly and festive. I'd sensed the heat emanating from a basin swimming with innumerable oil lamps – and the calm of the men meditating in front of the Shiva-lingams. I had also incurred the wrath of a young man for photographing the back of a cow with my mobile phone (cameras are forbidden here). In his opinion, cows should not be photo-



graphed. And four times I had been urged to take «one selfie, please» by young men who had just grazed their hair or rubbed their skulls with whitish powder (the sacred ash called *vibhuti*). Apart from all this, I had greeted a chalk-dusted Ganesh, a grass-hung Ganesh, a black Ganesh in a white robe, and a Ganesh made of gray earth.

Then I had stepped out into an open-to-sky, pillared hall, in the middle of which there was a

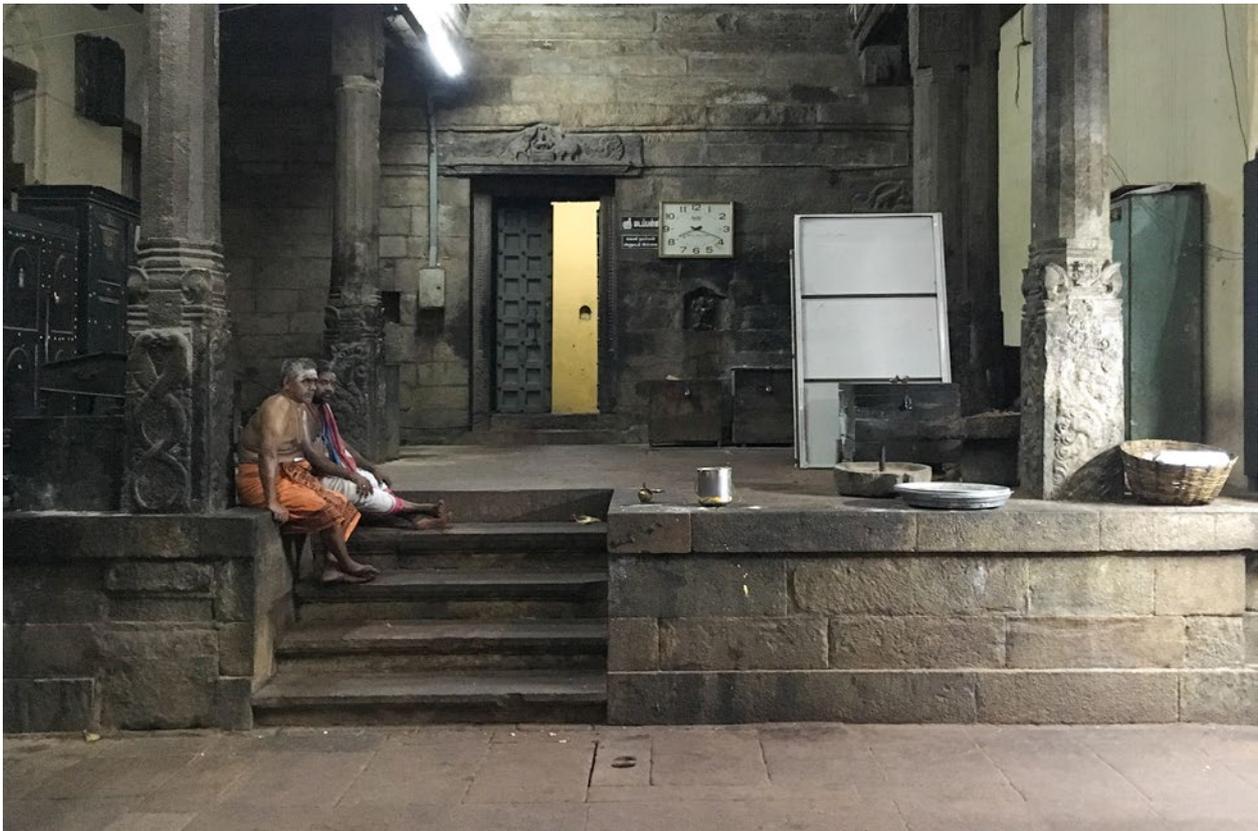


large lotus pond, and suddenly felt raindrops on my skin, and looked upwards. Standing in the sheltering portico I could not tear my gaze away from the skies. For, high over the eastern staircase of the temple, a tremendous thunderstorm had come into play, with masses of clouds of all shades of gray filling up the evening sky – which nonetheless still had some friendly, heat of the day-induced vibrant patches of blue peeping through, albeit smothered by a yellow-red, sulphur-poisonous shimmer. The clouds were such that you could imagine huge halls or even mountainous landscapes in them. And these ballrooms, these kingdoms of haze, were constantly illuminated by lightning that streaked, flashed and whipped through the clouds.

Who does not want to believe that it is majesty that is manifesting itself up there, that celestial battles are being fought, destructive dances being performed, that the rumbling, thundering and roaring is the echo of magical metals being lifted, shaken, swung, beaten, thrown and, astoundingly enough, hurled back.

And suddenly I know what a temple is. A temple is a place where one is safe from the gods, from their arbitrariness that manifests in the unpredictable lightning of fate, from their wrath, from the de-





structive force of their anger, or their exuberance. I also understand why one must feel as though one is inside an organ when one is inside such a shrine: it is dark and warm, the walls are oily and damp, it smells of rot and sweat, of incense and spices and, everywhere, there are tallowy powders and greasy pastes ready to be smeared on the face. Everything sticks together, runs out and into each other, atomises, crumbles, melts, and gives you the slightly oppressive but also reassuring feeling that you will dissolve the very next moment and be sucked into the organism.

What – or who – offers more protection from the wrath of the gods than a maternal super-shot, than a gigantic digestion-sex-organ, within which one is nourished in every nook and cranny with

sacred foods (*prasadam*) that are sweet, greasy, and nourishing and that you can unthinkingly slurp up? She is the temple, after all, She herself has produced the organ. We can therefore allow ourselves to fall, to melt, to be absorbed, as it were.

In reality, though, that is forbidden. For, even if the temple is a female super-organ, even if we crawl back deep into the mother's womb, it is the law of the father that holds sway here – since it is the male priests and their male assistants who tell us what we have to do and what we have to allow, and they are also the ones that finally lead us back to the exit and catapult us into the world where we are not safe from the gods. And that is, naturally, the trick of the whole exercise.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



MAGNIFICAT

Friday 28 December, 2012 – Periyar Tiger Reserve (India)

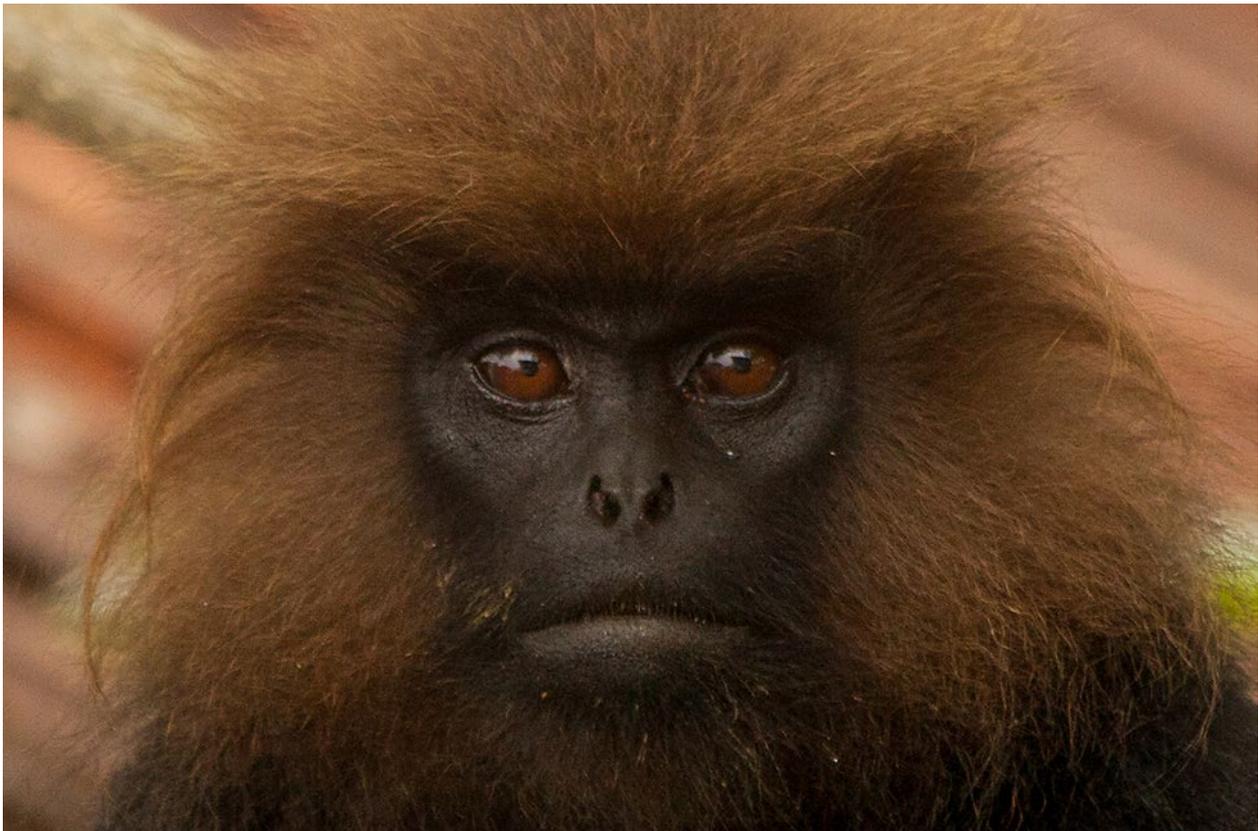
9.559004,77.156759

The difference is not that big. When we watch monkeys, we recognise much of ourselves in them: in their behaviour, their curiosity, their face. Monkeys are a caricature of the human being – which is, of course, a highly anthropocentric view of things. It is quite possible that monkeys see quite the opposite. But, mentally, we humans can easily ease ourselves into a monkey-skin because the caricature of ourselves is right within us.

And so we sit on a tree, pout our lips, stick out our stomach, suck air into our throat with our diaphragm, and let a lusty «Uhuh Uhuh» echo through the tree-tops, a call that can be heard for miles. Perhaps we are attempting to bring our horde to order with the call; maybe we are trying to lure a female into our lap. But then again, maybe the «Uhuh Uhuh» is of no significance whatsoever.

I am standing on the shore of the lake that forms the heart of Periyar National Park. Tree trunks stick out of the still surface of this body of water, which is a shallow pond in this dry season; they look like candle-straight, admonishing fingers, jet-black, as if a fire has murdered them. And from deep within the forest, from an inestimable distance, the call of a monkey reaches my ears over and over again. It is a dark deep song – it does not seem like a straight soundwave zipping towards me, rather it is like a snake slowly zig-zagging its way through the air to reach me. I have no idea which type of monkey calls in this fashion, but the sound seems to suit the oak-brown langur that I found staring out of a bush at me earlier in the morning.

Bach wrote his *Magnificat* with the aim of praising, celebrating, and magnifying God in



heaven. Even if one does not believe in God, one must be grateful to him for providing the composer with the pretext for creating such a supernatural set of sounds, stream of melody. Music gives people the feeling that they are more than what they are. It takes into their breast the idea that something higher lies within them, or works upon them. We do not think about the caricature within us, that giggling shadow that glides along with us throughout our lifetime, when a *Magnificat* fills our being.

Is the «Uhuh Uhuh» of the monkey his *Magnificat*? Does he punch the chant through the leaves with the aim of experiencing the higher? Or is the monkey simply that: a monkey? An animal who does not mind that time passes, that every evening he has to write in his diary: «Nothing special happened today.»? When zoologists speak of animals, you get the impression that the creatures are constantly doing meaningful, survival-related things,

taking part in a 24-hour program focussed on nutrition and reproduction. But does everything in a monkey's life have a purpose?

I like to imagine that the monkey sits, daydreaming, on its branch – without the feeling that it is missing out on something, without feeling any sense of obligation, any pressure to use time meaningfully, or at least to have some fun. Living in the here and now, *magnificat anima mea momentum*: «Uhuh Uhuh». For more than that there is no room on this branch.

It is quite in order then that we readily delegate this condition, which we fear as much as we desire, to the caricature of ourself, to our inner court jester, But, as I observed earlier, the difference is not so great: «Uhuh Uhuh» – *et nunc et semper et saecula saeculorum*.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.

This episoda was originally written in conjunction with a short video clip accessible at <https://vimeo.com/336872499>



CTRL+Z

Saturday, December 29, 2012 – Pambar (India) Tea Gardens

9.578738,77.046607

It is with the power of the line that almost all cultural landscapes counter the wildness of Nature. Quite like many painters who see diagonals, parallels, proportions in the chaos of the visible world. Farmers draw lines so that not even one bit of their harvest is lost across the boundary. Artists draw lines in order to portray their relationship with the world – and what is their art if not the result of this relation?

In the tea gardens of Pambar, the lines are a particularly crowded composition because they are very artfully drawn through the rolling hills. Yes, the rhythm of the rows of bushes and trees is so perfect that the absurd idea flashes through my head that this landscape was probably edited

by Photoshop – just like a photograph by Andreas Gursky or Jeff Wall.

The idea has unique consequences. Normally, my eye corrects the landscape: it overlooks the steaming garbage dump to the right, camouflages the auto-garage to the left, ignores the fat cable that cuts through the sky in front of me. In this case, however, my head is trying to imagine how the landscape looked before its beautification: with garbage, garage and cable. Klee's head did not make such cartwheels. His image processing had a different impact on his relationship with the world.

Translated from German by Gunvnti Balam.

The German version of this text has first been published in *Kunstbulletin* 4/2017, p. 168.





FROM A DISTANT WORLD

Saturday, January 14, 2017 – Calicut (India) harbour

11.264324,75.766192

It takes a while for the men to notice me. I sit in the shadows cast by the tall towers of colourful plastic boxes and watch them sorting shrimp on the beach – under the keen gaze of white herons stalking about on the boxes. The men have pulled their wooden barge into the sands: the stern faces the beach while the bow bobs gently back and forth in the surf. There is no pier in the port of Calicut (Kozhikode), no bridge where fishermen can deposit their catch. The harbour is basically a strip of beach flanked by a sip of sea protected by two sweeping ramparts of boulders, over which the waves of the Arabian Sea race in and break.

The larger boats are moored to buoys in the water, the smaller ones are lying on the land. The men hoist the dripping boxes onto their heads and

carry them to a shabby little hall where the shrimp are sorted before being sold to middlemen. The bearers don blue headscarves and brownish-gray hats to protect their skin and hair from abrasion. They also wear T-shirts with numbers on them, like a uniform, the various shades of indigo of which remind me of the blue wagons of the Indian Railway. The fishermen, on the other hand, wear shirts in all sorts of colours and have a bright cloth wrapped around their foreheads. This lends them a vague explorer-type appearance – as a child, in my fantasies, I had clothed Sindbad the Sailor in just this fashion.

I knew of course that I would find no traces of the region's great history in the port of Calicut – but I had come here, so it simply had to



be. This was the romantic homeland of the spices that medieval Europe had lusted after. This was the land where pepper grew, the famed Malabar Coast – with Calicut, located not far away from the legendary port of Muziris that disappeared under the sea in 1341, being the main centre of trade. For centuries, Arabian sailors had sailed here from the Persian Gulf to take spices back on their dhows. In Alexandria, they had sold them to the Venetians, who had dominated the Mediterranean since the 9th century. Starting out in Venice, merchants from Augsburg or Nuremberg would take their spices on the backs of their mules across the Alps – and on reaching their des-

tinuation they would pepper up the price of «Pfeffer» and other wondrous spices with a surcharge of up to 600 per cent; a price their spice-hungry clientele forked out without protest, evidently. So, when a peppercorn got on board a ship here in Calicut, it was embarking on a long voyage that would see it facing many tough realities before it ended up in a roast pork on the table of a German aristocrat.

The «pepper sacks», as the merchants north of the Alps were nicknamed by buyers with a combination of disgust and admiration, would probably have had little idea about exactly where the spices came from. And the doughty Arabs, who allowed themselves to be comfortably blown about the world by the monsoon winds, protected their extremely profitable business by inventing wild legends about the birthplace of their goods. They would, for example, tell their naive buyers that the pepper plantations back in the east were guarded by snakes, which people needed to kill with fire. However, most of these Arab spice sellers most likely knew only half the story about their produce. Although pepper, ginger, turmeric and cardamom grew in the hinterland of the Malabar Coast, nutmeg, cloves and cinnamon came





(partly along the land route) from Sri Lanka, even southeast Asia, to Kerala.

Traders from so many cultures met in Calicut that hardly two spoke the same language. The city, therefore, developed its own fingermarking system, which allowed traders from different parts of the world to do business with each other. The system evidently worked well for many hundreds of years; no wonder that the Portuguese were not welcome when they wanted to take over the business here after Vasco da Gama's landing in 1498.

Prior to its destruction by the irate invading Europeans, the Calicut area must have looked just like it does today. A lot of business must have been conducted directly across the rail of the ships, with the feet in the sands or in the shallow waters. There must have also been vendors back then, too, selling fresh vegetables, sweet fruit, stuffed shells, fried bananas and all kinds of colourful drinks. And countless dogs must surely have romped around here among the humans in the hope that something might fall to their lot here or there. The kites, gulls, herons and crows, which circle around the fishermen today, must have definitely dominated the space above the heads of the sailors at that time

as well. Only today, nobody deals with spices and gold, Chinese lacquerware, ceramics and teak on the beach of Calicut. The place is largely deserted. If anything is sent from here to the Arab world nowadays, it is the contract workers, who go on to toil in the hotels of Dubai or push wheelchairs across Sharjah's bazaars or fry in the sun on Qatar's construction sites.

The men have now noticed me and are waving to me, gesturing animatedly that I should go over. They want to be photographed, and are ready to strike laughing poses. Three of the porters surround me and start grabbing my backpack with unabashed curiosity, even putting on my sunglasses and my hat, and peering into my notebook. Everything about me seems to fascinate them, and suddenly I feel like an exotic beachcomber who has just been washed up at their feet by the Arabian Sea. And, to a certain extent, that's what I am – because there is no such thing as a tourist, really, in current-day Calicut.

One of the men speaks English and introduces himself to me as Amin. He has a friendly manner and appears smart, so I am happy to interact with him. I ask him about their shrimp business. He tells me about their shrimp; that they catch it near





the coast in shallow waters with the help of nets that are dragged over the seabed.

Why had I come to the harbour, he eventually asks me. I reply a bit awkwardly that their coloured plastic boxes had lured me to the place. Amin rolls his eyes. Ah yes, the boxes, he says. A few years ago, a friend of his had constructed a raft out of such boxes and sailed north on it. The summer winds had driven him to Oman, where he had married the daughter of a sheikh. Since then, he had been swimming in money and regularly sending his mother expensive clothes, his brothers dishwashers and his sisters precious jewellery.

I am prepared to accept the dishwasher story, but I cannot believe the story about the raft of boxes – because the boxes are full of holes. How could anyone have built a sturdy floating object, such as a raft, out of them? But Amin insists it is possible; he steps back and moves both his hands in a quarter-circle from the hips upwards in a powerful gesture that clearly suggests a big boost. To prove to me that it is indeed possible, he picks up a piece of the broken plastic cover of a cutter from the ground and draws a raft with a sail on the sand. That's exactly what the ship looked like, the man obviously assumes.

I still have my doubts. As I am mulling things over, there is a noisy crackle from the large loudspeakers installed on the beach, south of the port. I had walked past them an hour earlier and wondered about the tedium and effort of preparing for the Jammāt-e-Islami District Conference (announced on big banners). There is even a newly installed system of water-pipes and basins on the beach so that the faithful can have their ablutions before the evening prayers. A voice wafts over the sands to greet the first guests in the name of Allah. It does not sound like the voice of a religious leader or a theologian, but more like that of a salesman who wants to attract customers. And suddenly the realisation drops like scales of dandruff from my eyes: These are not the descendants of the Mughals who ruled over large parts of India from the 16th to the 19th century! These are the great-grandchildren of Arab merchants who were active here for centuries before the Romans and also after the fall of the empire: Jews, Christians, and increasingly from the 7th century onwards, the followers of Islam.

If I had thus far failed to detect any traces of the great merchants' city of yesteryear, I was now seeing them everywhere – even in the faces of the porters and fishermen. The most diverse influences



were now tumbling over one another before my eyes. And, among their ranks is definitely a Sindbad – that mystical sailor who set out fearlessly for a new world, seeking to fulfil his dreams.

And perhaps that's the reason that I have travelled all the way here: For the sake of my dreams. For, though I now deal with the most exotic spices on an almost daily basis, for me cardamom and turmeric, ginger and pepper remain what they were to

my ancestors a thousand years ago: a miracle from a strange and distant world. Being able to procure these spices easily today – that, too, at a highly affordable price – is not a matter of complacency for me. They are a magic taste from a place on this planet that, however often I may travel through it and however many of its idiosyncracies I may deal with, will forever remain a faraway world.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



A MIRACLE!

Saturday, January 28, 2017 – from Kanyakumari to Trivandrum (India)

(8.439578,77.040359)

Content, he gazes out into the green universe of coconut palms, rice fields and manioc plantations gliding gently past our train-windows. He opens his eyes, raises his eyebrows, puffs deep and merrily through his nostrils and grunts happily – as though he has discovered visible reality afresh. And all because of my glasses, which are now perched on his nose.

A little earlier he had made it clear to me with animated gestures that he wanted to try out the spectacles dangling from the neckline of my T-shirt. And now he is so thrilled with his newfound vision that he expresses his fervent desire, again with the use of his hands and highly revealing facial expressions, to keep the object permanently in his possession. He looks at me with heart-warming gratitude – as if it is I who has made him see. Now, for me

to demand my spectacles back would be an act of heartlessness.

Our train approaches Trivandrum, where I am scheduled to get off. I try, with unambiguous gestures, to get him to understand that I simply cannot do without my specs, and that these double-dioptre lenses are meant exclusively for reading (showing him my book) and that everything beyond the distance one metre will be a blur. But he is unmoved by my insistence, and continues to excitedly point to all the details in the passing landscape that he can now see, thanks to my magnifying glasses. It must be a miracle, naturally. And can you undo a miracle? Jesus, in any case, could not.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.





THE JACKFRUIT

Monday, January 30, 2017 – Thiruvananthapuram (India) Connemara Market

8.502820,76.951416

The onion hits my head. The woman is furious. I hear her ranting in the background, and am flummoxed by her shrill tone of voice. I don't realise, at first, that I am the person she had aimed the onion at. When I do, I feel shocked for a few seconds, but then an involuntary laugh bursts out of me – a robust guffaw that expels the many stings collected in my soul over the last few weeks of journeying through India. What a relief it is to stand in the middle of this market and laugh like an idiot that no cussword can harm.

The woman-vendor doesn't find it funny at all. She has clearly not sold much on this day, and is clearly in no mood for jokes. Her ranting now takes on a chilling tempo – had even one of her syllables turned into a ball, she would have knocked me off this planet in a jiffy. I am standing right in

front of her market stall and blocking her potential customers' view of her luscious snake-beans, mangos and taros: reason enough for her to want me to go hurtling into hell.

There is not much going on this hot afternoon at the Connemara Market located in the university district of Trivandrum. I am the sole potential customer around. In the sprawling fish hall, shop assistants sit around looking bored, waving the flies off their sardines. At Shahul's Halal Mutton Stall, a new meat chopping-board is in the process of being installed, with steel braces being cut to size. The vendor in the Lulu Chicken Shop is artistically balanced on a stool – his head has dropped to his chest and his arms hang limply between his thighs. Of the banana merchant one sees only a mighty belly, which glows like a big eye in



his dark little space between the half-closed shops and heavens now and again due to a rattling snore. Even the beggar, who has just returned from his lunch break, receives my coins with lethargy. Only in the cage with the quail is there much excitement – something that probably has to do with the gray cat that has settled down within jumping distance on a sack of potatoes.

For a while now I've been watching a man walking from one stall to another with a mighty fruit. It's a chakka, as the jackfruit is known in Malayalam. His goal is quite obviously to sell the massive fruit. He wears a clean shirt and a flawless white dhoti tucked neatly around his hips. With his shiny hair, his slightly gray, mottled beard and his ivory teeth, he looks very well-groomed: not in the least like a person who desperately needs to peddle a single fruit. But the way he goes about conducting his negotiations has something serious, insistent, and almost desperate about it. He apparently needs cash urgently – only, for what? He does not appear thirsty. But then appearances can be deceptive.

Given than various other stalls in the market also offer chakkas – most of which are larger, nicer, more mature ones – the shop assistants are not

particularly interested in his. As our paths cross for the second or third time, I speak to the desperate man: «What, you still haven't sold your fruit? Is it from your own garden?»

He nods. Don't I wish to buy it, he asks eagerly, it will fit neatly into your backpack. I refuse, uncertain about how seriously I should take his plea: «What would I do with a chakka? I am living in a hotel.»

This one is a very special fruit, he explains to me – you will need to consume it cooked now as it is raw, but in a few days you can eat it just as it is, because by then it will be perfectly ripe and perfectly sweet.

He speaks first-rate English – which does not surprise me at all. That's the way it is with all jackfruits, he declares, and proceeds to teach me that you can eat them as a vegetable when they are raw and as a fruit when they are ripe. The fruit's beauty is not special though, he admits – unfortunately, that is indeed the case.

«You have quite some competition here in the market.»

«That's right. That's a bit of a problem.»

«How much do you want for the fruit?»

«130,» he says.





He utters the words from between his teeth, as if they should have remained a secret. Then, this slight look of despair flits over his features again, a look that does not completely dissolve in his smile. Two francs, you get about three kilos of bananas or two stately bottles of beer.

«I find it most peculiar,» I say, «that you have only one fruit to sell.»

Yes, he admits, it is strange.

I ask him if I can photograph him. He agrees, and as I take the photograph, I laugh again. My humour transmits itself to him and suddenly we find tears of laughter running down our cheeks.

«Well, now we've made the fruit famous,» I finally say with yet another chuckle. «Now it should not be a problem for you to sell it – not even for double the price.»

Again we laugh. Nevertheless, I can feel his despondency, which penetrates through his ve-

neer of stoic cheerfulness. I wish him good luck and shake his hand, which leaves a sticky secretion on my fingers.

I step out of the gate into Mahatma Gandhi Road, but then I turn on my heels and step resolutely back towards the vegetable department. I will give the man the 130 rupees. And he will tell me why he needs the money so badly. But the man is not there anymore. I hurry around, I search for him – in vain. As I pass the stall of the woman-vendor who threw the onion at my head, I see a chakka lying next to her. I'm sure it was not there earlier – such a mighty fruit lying amongst tiny vegetables would have certainly caught my eye. Can it be that the tartar has redeemed my friend? I give her a keen look, but find no hint of a smile on her face.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.