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SECULAR

Must seculate the mind
to survive superstitious doubt.
A terror in the night: *Dasein*,
dreams of travel. Can't I stop
traveling. Inside.
Where it hurts to ride.

All too permanent anxiety.
But all the while the permanent me
is sitting quiet in the stony shadow
of some church unmoving
where she lets me know her mind
deep inside her body
because poems are so beautiful.
Tether to this. Sick desire
coated endlessly with thought,
a concretion of everything
that thinks. It shines. A pearl.
Embedded in the dark.

Secular. Like a priest
down the street carrying
ordinary bread, a newspaper,
secular, like a cigarette,
a spoiled banana on the ground.
Not like the sacred mangoes
of dream we press to ooze
along the welcoming flesh.
Not like that. Secular,
pass by a church you don't

believe in, a girl smiling at you
through the window of the bank.
Secular, like grass. It has to work,
to wake me from the sacred,
from dread, my dream. Sometimes
a bus is so pure, a passing truck
is like an angel's wing.
Give me back the street, the sweet as-is.

But the secular is hard as the columns
of Saint-Sulpice, hard to summon
hard to keep. Because we go to sleep
together and wake up alone.
Because the dream is waiting
to expose the stone as the impostor
that anyone at all is that is not you,
you sentimental waltz of molecules
I try so hard to believe. To sit there
leaning on the wall. To do what I have to
do, what desire writes into the world
using all the instruments of me it rouses
before the dream snatches certainty away.
I have bad dreams. The priest himself
drops his bread and walks into the sky.

1 May 2002

SATELLITE LINK

This isn't real stuff you see on the screen,
it's a dream pretending to be a vision
but it's just what somebody else saw first

and spews it out on you. The little
lunchbox in the sky from which we feed,
vagrant data adding up to nada,
colors stampeding inside the furniture.

1 May 2002

So he comes up to her on the street and says Who am I?
Actually he crosses the street through traffic to get to her.
He saw her from across the street and thought he knew her.
Actually he had never seen her before but needed her now,
needed the shape of her the way she moved the way she must
be thinking if she walks that way. Felt that. Needed to know.
So who am I? he said meaning Who are you? but she understood
all he was driving at, nothing, a moment of confusion,
two people on the street, love affair, eternal strangers passing.

2 May 2002

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this plane I'm sitting on at JFK
is the fifteenth lately
and I'm still waiting for the sky

the real one the one beyond the sun
where planes tilt shyly and fall back
because of the face up there even they can read

a smile as wide as the universe
or maybe a little bigger sometimes
it's frightening to see such happiness

as if joy too were a mouth that took me in.

2 May 2002/Idlewild
(30.V.02 Cthk)

TARMAC

What a word, British, I guess, they use it here,
All over, everybody reads action books,
What we used to call adventure but nobody comes
Anymore it's all going and staying and
Hitting the tarmac running and having your hands
Full of lethality is that a word, guns chattering
Like a field trip of junior high students
Getting to the top of a hill and finding nothing there.

We too are waiting for something, some inconceivable
Department store to open so we can feel at home
At last shopping and disdaining and caressing fabrics
As if the emptiness they clothe were skin and bone.
We are waiting at what they call a gate.
What do they call me, a man strapped into an armchair
About to fly over the moon to the Indies,
Absurdity of travel, silliness of names, who cares,
Any name is just a fallow field drowsing in sun.

2 May 2002
(30.V.2002, Cthk)

RADIO

When I was a child The Answer Man
Is what I wanted to be. Think
Of all the things an answer man could be.

2 May 2002/Idlewild

AIRPORT

The jets begin to rev. The long
Digression called Being somewhere in a place

Is about to end. We begin to go.
Going is evidently our natural state.

The norm. *Fuir*, as the man said,
Fleeing, word of the largest tribe.

2 May 2002

Idlewild

APORIA

Suppose around the borders of an idea
a wrought-iron fence like old New York
brownstones or Bloomsbury.

Suppose anything you think
keeps some other thinking out.

Philosophy I think is a mode
of banishing thought. Unavailing,
because thinking is like water –
spill it, boil it, drink it, piss it out,
it all returns to that holy cloud
our atmosphere. The sea above.

2 May 2002

in flight JFK-CDG

STANDING IN FRANCE ON THE GROUND

Under the sun on a northern plain
The jests of politics around us
Something moves in a line of poplars
Half a mile away it's the tail of a big jet
Cruising its runway there, beyond
The natural. I keep bringing
This idea with me, that it matters
Where I am, at least enough so that I go
Elsewhere a while and stand there.
Waiting for air, an air that must
Somehow be different or why
Would a man go there to breathe it?
Why would they vote for Le Pen?
Nobody knows why they do what they do—
That's my blues, and my gift to the planet
Sweeter than lilacs. Know that
And you're safe for a while, nobody knows
Why they do what they do. Need
Is delicate, need remembers. Envious
Salées they sell inside, means potato chips
And dry cheese sandwiches, I thought
It meant salty desires, or desires salted
With my needs. But then I thought
An airport was a doorway for the air.

3 May 2002, Paris

The brave quiet heart
Of a fire extinguisher
Tall red canister
Freestanding
Candle against catastrophe
The northern Paris smog
Condenses in strong
Sunlight, a string
Of shadow across terrazzo.
It is an airport. Bring
Something with you to think.
Everything is ready
For you to wait.

3 May 2002

CDG

SOMEWHERE, OVER A WAR

We are settled in the air, reading
Cosmopolitan or playing solitaire
Or frankly drowsing. Down there
Thirty thousand feet or so a war
Is happening, men are wounded
A few are dying, mostly
They're standing around in the sun
Waiting to die. We float
Above their anxieties, fueled
With our own. It was Iran
We were over, now Afghanistan.
The vertical difference, as if
We were gods of a sort, indifferent,
Soon to fall. What can it mean
To be so far above a war?

3 May 2002

over the Hindu Kush

PAKISTAN

Down there. Where my ancestor
Maybe left survivors
For me to relate to. I hope so.
Just like me. I look at the world
And want to know who.
It seems intolerable to me
To fly so fast over so much,
Leaving a shadow if anything
For a moment etched
On the ground where he lived.
Did things. Bred. Thought.
Wrote long letters home and died.

3 May 2002

in flight

KEEP DIPPER NIGHT DISTANCE

rear end of trucks

sometimes **DEEPER**

chiasmus:

keep distance

[use] dipper (=flash high beam) [at] night

this is the interpretation

My eyes tired. I will do

whatever you tell me.

I want this deeper night distance

It is midnight, 95°, terrible.

It feels like I've come home.

2.

Keep deeper night distance

flashes the Instructor,

the vehicle ahead of me

teaches me the road

to explore the deep of night

and measure them,

and keep them, keep
as a man keeps bees

or a woman keeps her husband happy?
And to know.

Who is even asking?

4 May 2002

Delhi

=====

There are so many near me that it seems.
But what is the apparition. Hotel
register, we are born out of our names.
Here is my passport, let me sleep.
All the rest of me is my mother's,
Just meat.

 So I am singing now,
to you. A verb always
gets in trouble. Wanting you,
a word spills its own kind of true.
I mean you
 is the truest of all our lies.

4 May 2002,
Delhi, Majnukatilla.

NIGHT TRAIN

Feet-first to the north
on the Jammu Mail
clamped in a coffin
sized bunk in a cold
train through the hottest
night the Punjab
blanks out around me
worry on worry
I can do nothing
but accept my position
as a condition
of human life
hurtling, no money
of all my money
no thought
of all my thinking
changes it,
it will happen with me
as it does, the terror
of being handed over
to one's own destiny
in the dark, a stranger's
foot sticking out of
the curtains above me
the only thing
the nightlight shows.
I have put myself here,
and that was the end
of all my choosings,
here where all my valid

choices left me,
I belong to what happens.
Now near dawn it is
fifth day of the fifth
months they call
in China the day
of poetry, get high
as they can
over their lives
and look down
on the pattern
with sixteen
tuneful syllables or so
and here I lie
wordlessly rocked
resisting to the last
this thing that I
and no one else
am doing.

5 May 2002

on the train from Delhi to Pathankot

India silences me.

Every time.

All holiness and car horns

Non-stop.

Everybody understands everything

And nothing changes.

6 May 2002

Dharamsala

Tendrel ripen here.

Here being

Being wherever you are.

If I say your name enough

Even one more time

Before the dawn

The mountains will confess

The single thing they know.

He knew what was in my heart

But maybe nobody

Knew what was on my mind.

6 May 2002

Sherab Ling

BAIJNATH

At the Shiva Temple
where Tilopa ground his seeds
shrine room with the little silver snake

a tourist is one
who witnesses the other

comes for what is seen.
Cherishing the seen

these virtual postcards
mind taking charge
of the momentary beauty of the world

some benefit?
Monkeys scurry under banana leaves outside.

6 May 2002
Bajjnath, H.P.

Monkeys. Parrots. Myna birds.

You heard a leopard coughing near you in the gully.

Every moment, wherever you are,

the Other Life is opening.

Whatever life you think you're living,

the other life is already there

living itself in you, around you

sometimes, so that you even see it

snow peaks, long glacier, the golden roof

of the pagoda.

All the evidence of otherwise.

7 May 2002

Sherab Ling

(Notes on India)

This strange exotic world is in fact the permanent neolithic technology of earth; what seems so strange is the norm. This is how people have lived on the earth for the last twelve thousand years. Yet I'm surprised to find the same India I saw and feared and loved and left with tears in my eyes nineteen years ago, at the other end of the Terai.

The same India. All the innovations fall into place, seem cute or weird a while then soon take on the patina of the ordinary, the soft eroded look even the freshest things have in India, the fine red dust, the delicate smogs. Rich complexity of government bureaucracy, red tape, laissez-faire, bribes that are perquisites of ill-paid office, toll roads, narrow tracks all rock and sand suddenly become paved highways neatly laned with broken white line, then with equal suddenness resume their ancient rocky sandy unpaved condition. Buses pass on curves over cliffs, sheer sleight of wheel.

At intervals along the primitive roads you'll see a cairn of bricks, taller than a man, stacked solid, fresh clean bricks. They always look tottery, none too neatly piled up, yet they have the presence of an ancient carven stele. I look to read the king's name, or a wistful poem some exile set up to while away his banished hours. Just clean pink brick in the sun.

7 May 2001

Gyuto Monastery, Sidhbari

The tourist cherishes the seen
for the sake of seeing
takes in a sight and marvels
at its lyric beauty or antiquity or absurdity or
whatever animal of response
slinks out of his cave at the sight

but really marvels at his own presence,
at his I Am Here, I Am Seeing This,
And I Will Take It Home With Me
And Having Seen This

Will Make Me Who I Want To Be.
A person who has seen.
Yet for all this selfery,
in fact this taking in
is a preservation of the world,
a praise of Buddhamind, of mind
itself alone
among the ruins of what it's thought,

mind that lets us witness its unfailing
play of phenomena
all real enough, just barely, to take in.

I think we do the world and its beings a favor
by taking in and retaining -- even if with gradual erosion,
accretion, distortion -- certain beauties we have seen,

taking in and saving them.

Savings Bank.

But who invests this beauty in our fragile banks,
in even our mute perceiving?

Mute. That's the issue,
that's the taste I seem to feel here--

is it enough that some collocation of phenomena
present itself as singular
just once to the mind
and get taken in by someone's mind
as an act of desperate witness

sheer seeing seeing sure
even if no text or image or report ever comes of it?

Is it enough to see?

7 May 2002

Sidhbari

Somewhere in the night.

1.

Train standing still a while
softly wakes us. One light
far outside the scarred windows.

Maybe we'll see a name.

Name in night. It's what
travellers have to go on,
names of places
they think they are
in homeless weather.

2.

Pick words with care
they're all I have
left in mind
to solve the images
that came in sleep.
An argument.
Shaving the beard
of a hairless man.

8 May 2002
on the Jammu Mail,
Pathankot-Delhi

fantastic acacias -- or jacaranda in purple bloom -- sometimes so lush they turn the sweltering sordid roadside hamlets into postcards from Paradise with snow peaks beyond and seen through them, a world that suddenly seems the permanent order of life on earth, and through such trees Stevens's 'angel of earth' comes walking softly always towards us sarcastic as the Punjabi heat.

8 May 2002,

Jammu Mail, Pathankot-Delhi

Down one of the narrow dirty alleys of the New Tibetan camp
I came to a broken roof I walked out on and saw
The whole breadth of the Yamuna River stretching away in green heat
Over the vast plain that somehow found a place for itself in the city
Only a few people here and there bent low working, and a duck quacked.

8 May 2002

Delhi

(1.VI.02)

in one of those passages of life that are so strangled in one's own resentment of having to endure them, one of those stretches of time merely endured, almost in one's resentment refusing to be conscious of that which passes, one of those passages of life that one never expects to report itself and its picturesque circumstance later gaily to friends in the lovelier endurance called everyday life, I sprawled on an ancient tattered plush settee in a Majnukatilla guest house and watched religious programs, Hindu evangelists singing and crowd-working and doing pujas on the TV, just as in the American farmland, religion is entertainment, what else does anybody have of gaud and pomp and presence but the church full of lights and smoke, the shrine full of cochineal and turmeric dyes scattered, the bleating of goats, the sense of the bearded priests soaked in the sweat of their robes like me in that room for hours too exhausted to read or write or do anything but wait for the hour when we leave for the airport southwest of the city and hoping we get there and moving, faintly, even me, even then, to the muffled chant of priests hanging flowers on the snake-wreathed statue of Krishna blue as billiard chalk smiling through the staticky image, muffled by the roar of the not-exactly-airconditioner whirring fanned air over wet bristles of straw to do something, anything, about the 115° heat and the desert dryness and when will the monsoon come?

8 May 2002 (1.VI.02)

Delhi

Flying over Pakistan

A little north of my great-grandfather's city.

I seem to be the only one awake

and why? The girl on the cover of *Paris Match*

is shouting at Le Pen with her open mouth

but her eyes are saying something different,

beckoning the image-maker, see me, look at me,

an appalling naked hunger to be known

no matter who no matter how.

I know her as much as you can know a picture,

I can do nothing for her loneliness

And I try to drowse away my own.

Upright like yogis we sleep our way to France

Where it is the Feast of the Ascension

When someone walked up the stairs before us.

9 May 2002

Air France

Des Indes

1.

Filling a pot hole:

A man gathers round stones

From the side of the road

Fits them one by one

Into the pot hole

Neatly neatly

He squats down at the rim

Neat fold of his legs

And packs the stones in

Another man comes

With a pail of hot asphalt

And ladles it on.

Two Byzantine

Mosaicists

At work on the Punjabi road.

2.

Everywhere men

In polyester slacks

And sports shirts

Break stone

With iron mallets.

3.

India.

Everybody

Doing something

All the time.

Except the dogs

Asleep in the sun

Very flat.

Hakim. The dogs

In their wisdom

Have given up.

A trick that people

With all their books

Try not to learn.

9 May 2002

Impressions des Indes

Impressions? Percussions.
It's everywhere at once.
But mostly the flower of human acts,

Shy, perfectly complete,
Each one.

The way they drive
Intelligently belligerent
Merciful exact.
They drive like Gods
As if they can do anything
And live forever.
They fit together
On the urgent road
Like mosaic tiles
On an eternal wall

Every one of them
Is the center of the universe.

Where the Grand Trunk Road
Crosses the Yamuna
And joins our road
They really are.

9 May 2002

THE RED FORT IN DELHI

Aniconic. I mean
the Red Fort is all statement
and no illustration.
No pictures, strict Islam.

Yet such a purely
geometrical structure
turns out to be itself
the greatest image,

icon, gravest idolatry.
Because it boasts
To be itself,
A complete thing,

A circumstance apart.
What could that be but God?

Structures like Notre-Dame or Ely allow a separation, however frail, between the structure and its surface, the face of rock bearing the traces that men --not nature-- have worked onto it, wresting out of stone the fanciful resemblance to some living thing, what a tender, child-like, humble thing to do. But the Red Fort is in a class with the Great Pyramid. It has no idols on it or in it. It is itself an idol, a scale model of God.

9 May 2002

Delhi-Paris