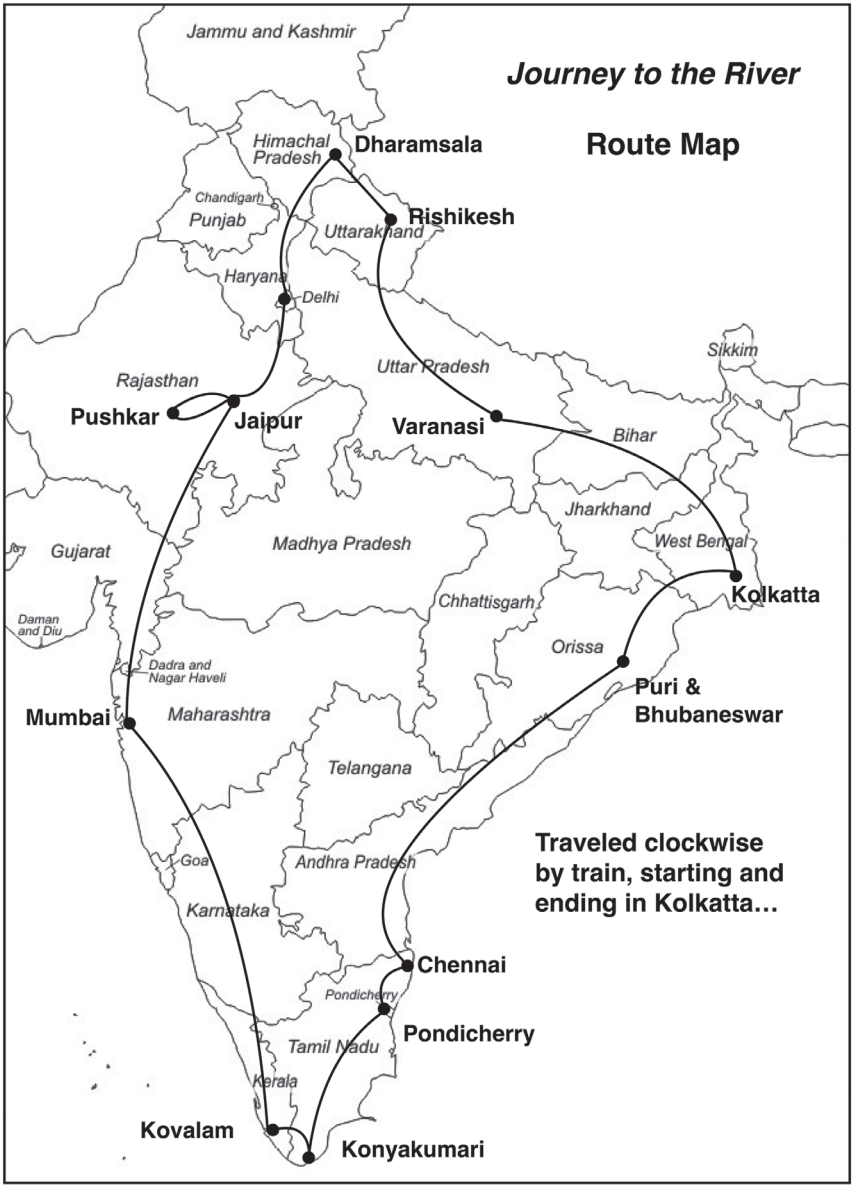
# Journey to the River


Journey to the River
Route Map
Jammu and Kashmir
Himachal Pradesh
Dharamsala
Chandigarh
Punjab
Rishikesh
Uttarakhand
Haryana
Delhi
Sikkim
Uttar Pradesh
Rajasthan
Pushkar
Jaipur
Varanasi
Bihar
Jharkhand
Madhya Pradesh
West Bengal
Gujarat
Kolkatta
Chhattisgarh
Daman and Diu
Orissa
Dadra and Nagar Haveli
Puri & Bhubaneswar
Mumbai
Maharashtra
Telangana
Traveled clockwise by train, starting and ending in Kolkatta…
Goa
Andhra Pradesh
Karnataka
Chennai
Pondicherry
Pondicherry
Tamil Nadu
Kerala
Kovalam
Konyakumari

# Journey to the River

## India Travels

Rick Clark

Journey to the River: India Travels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*I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.*

**Theodore Roethke**

*The only journey is the one within.*

**Rainer Maria Rilke**

*Every day is a journey, and the journey is home.*

**Matsuo Basho**

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# Poems

# Preface

I had no specific or distinct purpose in writing this book when, in 2001, my wife, Fran Gallo, and I set out on our journey by train around India. My purpose in traveling around India was simply to forget my life back home in the United States in order to live fully in the moment while moving through this vast and fascinating country. Keeping a journal, in my mind, was a way to focus sharply on the vivid and sense-stimulating world through which we were traveling. As a poet, creative writer, college creative writing instructor, cultural critic, and strict secularist, I could have predicted that I would write a diverse, mixed genre, mixed voice body of language that might also be memorable to me and even personally monumental. But I had no intention of publishing the journal in any form. When Pina Publishing presented the opportunity to publish a book of my choice, I realized that the India journal might make a great book.

Another story behind this manuscript might be of interest. Once Fran and I returned to the United States and I went to pick up the 950 slides I'd shot during our journey, I discovered that only 84 photos had been exposed. All the rest were black. I was devastated. But once I picked myself up off the floor of the drugstore where I'd taken my film to be processed, I found myself reading my journal and hearing myself say, "Hey, this isn't too bad. I've really captured some vivid images in words here." I found myself relieved that I had this very image-heavy journal to make up for what I'd lost in my photos. In fact, this put unexpected weight on the journal that I might not have felt but for the loss of those slides. This became another reason for my publishing it: as a way to follow through with and wrap

up our experience in India. Publishing this book redeems the loss of the photos.

The book was written as a journal, not a guidebook, although there's plenty of information to be gleaned from it. I saw the writing as part of the adventure, as a way to sharpen my senses, tune my mind, and get the language wheels spinning as we moved. It's a meditation, a sort of rhapsody on the nature of existence, experience, travel, and place, although at times it descends to record the simple facts of the day's movements. I did virtually no research for this book; I had no specific focus or interest except what my senses and imagination were drawn to. I trusted to my eyes, ears, nose, taste buds, and skin to direct my pen, as I wrote the whole body of language by hand, eschewing the latest technology for the old-fashioned way.

My thanks first and foremost to my wife, Fran Gallo, for being the other half of our India train journey. She and I met in Japan and have a long history of traveling together. A big thank you, also, to Steve McCall, with whom I traveled in India 21 years before, in 1980, and to whom I sent copies of pages of the journal as backup, making him my default readership. Oodles of thanks to Jeanne Bender, of Pina Publishing, who asked me for a manuscript and who herself is a veteran traveler as well as an aspiring writer. Finally, huge gratitude to the many people, particularly the people of India, we met along the route of our journey. My apologies for being so tough on a culture I otherwise love. I'm much tougher on my own country.

Rick Clark
Seattle
August 31st, 2015

# Flight to India

**December 31, 2000.** Fran and I sit peacefully in our Seattle-Tacoma International Airport terminal reading and writing. Our flight attendants have just now shown up to board the plane. Departure for India has all come together so smoothly: We've got our Seattle and Ocean Shores lives covered—our cat Little Bear, our jobs, our homes, our friends and family. Interestingly, I have a swollen knee—unaccountably puffed up, stiff, and sore. Was it all the stress building up to departure? Was it pushing last chance at violin? I knew I wouldn't be able to play every day, as I was used to, since I'd decided not to bring the instrument along, so maybe I twisted my knee as I played all the more vigorously knowing how much I'd miss it. Was it facilitating that last yoga retreat? Going for a couple of jogs recently? The body! What a mystery!

**January 1, 2001.** In an elongated cylindrical room suspended high in air we chase the sun around the Earth. I leapt us right over New Year's just by advancing my watch to Tokyo time. We've managed to squeeze twenty-seven hours into ten hours just by flying over an arbitrary invisible line in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Whitecaps and waves crashing below make

for a surface of chaos and confusion, dapplings and featherings. Also below float a few complacent puffs of clouds.

This is how I see it, how my pen describes it; this must be how I feel. Time stretched and compressed, emotions running every which way—back to Seattle, back to Seattle Central Community College, back to the place on the Washington coast we call Little Renaissance, forward to India and writing, time with Fran—one big beautiful opening, ten weeks, of the unknown and adventure, Fran's first time in India. And now we're about to land for a short stopover in Japan's Narita International Airport—from there, Kolkata.

# Kolkata (Calcutta), West Bengal

**January 3, 2001.** We flew into Kolkata; otherwise, I didn't know where we were, except that Kolkata is in the state of Bengal in the country of India. We took a taxi to Sudder Street; otherwise, I didn't know where we were, except that Sudder Street is where a lot of travelers stay in Kolkata. We followed a Muslim man who appeared out of nowhere to guide us this way and that through the dismal backstreets of Kolkata to find us a room; otherwise, I didn't know where we were. I lay in the dark, in our windowless Dolphin Hotel room, not knowing at all where we were, which way was north or south, east or west, where we'd come from, where anything was in relation to anything else. The dark, the sound of the fan, the cool moist air—all grew thick around me, the mattress beneath me more solid, more palpable than I could remember a mattress ever feeling. I couldn't have felt more removed, cut off, adrift—and awake.

The day after we arrived in Kolkata, we found a neat clean breakfast nook—and Sudder Street again—thanks to a

scraggly-looking Brit named Drew, whom we asked for directions out in the street. In the restaurant, Fran picked up a tiny vase from the table, with three roses in it, astonished at how delicate and fresh they looked. I couldn't help but remark: "It's an oasis of scent in a pit of malodor!"

Despite how difficult and painful it was to get settled into a hotel last night, despite how awful I felt, what with my swollen knee, my thrown-out lower back, my tremendous need to get to a toilet that nearly resulted in disaster, and despite the fact that Fran got sick this morning after she took her malaria tablet on an empty stomach—despite all this—today's meals, our trading of our old guide book for a new one, our checking out potential hotels to move into tomorrow, and our going to get India Rail passes and train reservations—our day went quite well. We were back in our hotel room by three. I was so prepared for everything to take more time and be more difficult that today seemed slick by comparison. I'll have to give the movie of our first day in India, and in Kolkata, two thumbs up.

Indians simply have to have a register book, forms in triplicate, various classifications and blanks for arbitrary information. Hence the need to have near to hand our passports and passport numbers, visa numbers, dates and places of issue, expiration dates, addresses abroad, etc.—just to stay in a cheap hotel for one or two nights! Our desk clerk caught us—was apparently watching vigilantly for us—as we returned from our first day's activities in Kolkata, just to get us to fill in a few more bits of data we'd missed when we checked in late the night before. Chidingly, I asked if the guys behind the desk were the police. Fran asked if they wanted our thumbprints. I suppose this compulsive bureaucratic

monster was unleashed by the British, a habit Indians worry accounts for what efficiency they do have. Why let go of a good thing? And they gather and keep all this red tape despite the growing presence of the computer terminal. Today, at the train reservation booking office, I filled out forms and covered eight traveler's checks with all the usual information, despite the fact that a second agent was typing all our information into the system at a computer keyboard.

Still no water, let alone hot water, from our shower.

The taxi horn can speak many words of the universal language of taxi horns! Get out of my way! it beeps. Get out of my way! it honks. I'm coming through! Make a little room! I'm coming over! Watch it! You're about to sideswipe me! Get out of my way! I'm carrying important cargo! VIPs! I've got work to do, money to make, family to feed, an economy to support! Beep!

Life is a close call in Kolkata—in all of India! Lorries brush bumpers with taxis that brush mirrors with motor rickshaws that do the two-step with motorcycles that interweave with bicycles all of which wipe their grimy fenders and running boards on bare legs and Western pant legs, saris, and salwaar kameezes. Somehow crows, pigeons, dogs, and cats flit between bumpers and wheels. Today I spotted a pigeon, dusty and emaciated, standing with its beak in a door frame, stunned to a death-like stupor by the monstrous chaos that is this world—vicious manifestations of Shiva. Noise, noise, noise!

**January 4, 2001.** My mission here in India, should I choose to accept it, as we train around the country? To get past myself

and attend to detail, to learn more about Indian history and culture, to color my writing with the sights, sounds, and smells of this ancient, ever striving, ever self-defeating, ever chaotic country. Otherwise, my mission is to get back in touch with my body, overcome the stresses and tensions I brought with me from Seattle, from the horrendous buildup to departure. My knee is swollen and only partially mobile, my lower back cranky and painful, my eyelids red, my psoriasis acting up. I'm a mess—but I'm still having a good time! Oh and my eyes are weak. Can I beat back the damage, the aging, the inevitable deterioration of demanding life and pushing hard? Jetlag is still plaguing us, though Fran managed to fall back to sleep this morning to bring her further into sync with India time. I lay awake for hours, listening to the late-night sounds of Kolkata.

On the plane over, from Seattle to Tokyo, I got to thinking about my past and the "negotiability of dreams," as I might choose to coin the expression. How I was able to transfer some of my "dream energy" from becoming a working musician, teacher, and ultimately composer, to becoming, instead, a poet, a composer of words and images who teaches writing for a living and plays violin on the side. How important, nevertheless, it is for me to grow through my art and expression, through the process at least as much as through the product. Yet that older dream still haunts me, drives me forward, despite the transfer of energies, like some ghostly taskmaster or archetypal promethean conductor of the orchestra that is my body, the melody that is my heart, the rhythms that are my nerves. My big effort at "dream negotiation" ultimately took place when I was living and teaching in Japan, after I met Fran and began building something solid and wonderful with

her—which brings up another issue: How one's dreams and one's love relationships come into conflict; how, to love, one must have managed to "become," and how, to become, one must have managed to find support, and how the exchange must be equitable and balanced, though possibly of altogether different substance.

For a while I didn't believe. I didn't believe that what I imagined for this journey away from home and away from stress and productivity and lists of things to do and projects and teaching and retreats and computers and websites would actually slip into walking through strange cities in a strange land, taking each day again as it comes, reading prose again, writing in a journal, reflecting further inward and backward and outward. I did not believe, but here today, lying these last few minutes on the quadruple bed of the Dolphin Hotel, I'm reading a novel, not a classic, but J. M. Coetze's *Waiting for the Barbarians,* and writing in this perfectly selected journal filled with high quality narrow-ruled paper and covered in plastic, with a University of Washington insignia. One *can* really circle back. One *can* do the old route more deeply, with a sharper eye and more detailed sensual language for the journal. One *can* continue to spiral growingly infinityward.

We've moved to a hotel on Sudder Street and are lounging around our room. The days seem to stretch to years, so rich in detail is this world. A buzzard swoops down on a scrawny cat, who, in turn, eyes a pigeon outside our heavy, wire-mesh window, across narrow Stuart Lane. Below, at the foot of a wall, endlessly occupied by man after man, are two open urinals, each with two slightly angled steppingstones. I've seen these

pee-foot-pads textured and in the shape of a foot. Just outside the gate of our no-drugs, no-alcohol Hotel Maria, young men proffer hashish and ganja. Horns and bells of every imaginable pitch and timbre echo up through our window, mixed with husky crow caws and chirpings of the ubiquitous English sparrow. Laughter and banter of hotel boys, rattle of pushcarts. A pebble clatters down a corrugated roof. Doors open and shut. The general hum of Sudder Street comes from beyond these more immediate sounds—growl and buzz of vying and relenting taxi and motorcycle. All this I see and hear in a matter of seconds. I lay here listening, my ears opening to catch every sound, writing, streaming black ink on paper to render it all as accurately, sensually, and memorably as possible in this moment that seems to verge on eternity. The city just goes on!

***Nothing Greater***

*Nothing greater can be stretched*
*than the imagination.*

*And Einstein was right:*
*We can bend this light!*

Now we're up on the roof terrace of our Sudder Street Hotel Maria where now, as usual it seems, we've attracted a number of people. We often note, this time no exception, that whenever we find a quiet coffee shop, a bench in a park, or a rooftop terrace, a spot vacant and empty, next thing we know we have a crowd around us. These today are young French people. One birdlike figure with bad teeth busily hangs clothes to dry. Still, we have the perfect Seattle summer day here in Kolkata, in early

January. The thick air warms us with the slowing movement of the sun as it descends toward the looming silhouette of a building. Great birds of carrion work the realms just above the rooftops, in a column rising to great heights, no doubt over some animal as it struggles to stay alive. I saw several life-beaten dogs today not far from having their bones picked clean by these ever hovering, ever vigilant yet rarely noticed birds.

And below, the political strike continues. Recently, a certain communist party held a rally in a neighboring city where terrorists from yet another communist party threw rocks and wounded a party leader and a bodyguard. As a result, her party initiated a strike across the state of Bengal. From six this morning to six this evening, all non-government and non-public businesses and services are to have shut their doors or turned off their motors. But here in Sudder Street, where tourists and travelers require a modicum of basic services, and where businesses of a more capitalistic bent have grown accustomed to tourist cash flow, some shops and restaurants have ignored the strike and opened their doors, pulling their grates only halfway up (or down) to deflect possible bombs or stones. And sure enough, only minutes before Fran and I returned from our inordinately quiet walk on Park Avenue, several restaurant windows were smashed, and even a biscuit vender had his jars shattered and stacks of cookies toppled. Still, Jojo's, a restaurant across from our hotel that we've taken to frequenting, persists in keeping its doors open. We threw caution to the wind, in fact, and went there for lunch, only a couple hours after the owners had swept up the broken glass. Departing, we met Sikh owner Nazim and had a good conversation with him. A real gentleman, as Fran later described him.

***Kite Skeletons***

*Two kites, now skeletons,*
*snagged side by side*
*unknown years ago*
*on a power line.*

*Nothing left but*
*two stick crosses*
*married by wire*
*and some kid's history.*

*Forgotten, remembered?*
*I can only guess,*
*but seen by me just now:*
*a few last tatters*

*hanging from an arm*
*in the labyrinth of Calcutta*
*a few feet below*
*our hotel roof.*

**January 6, 2001.** It takes time to see. To see through the apparent chaos, through the first impression, through the careening senses themselves—through, even, the superimposition of our whole past lives, the beliefs and opinions we bring along with us to a new world. But what a mishmash of prerogatives and imperatives Sudder Street is! Who really is struggling to survive? Who pretends? Who scams? And who's the boss? How do all these belief systems and political affiliations and cultures and nationalities pass each other so fluidly, so matter-of-factly, on the same filthy street? And then there are the animals: the pariah dogs, the big

silver-headed crows, the lackluster pigeons, the ever-adaptable sparrows. And the no-less-diverse array of vehicle types: the yellow and black taxis, shining with pride; the motor rickshaws, bowing down to and squeezing through the now dominant taxis; the foot-drawn rickshaws, surviving on the scam or selling drugs; the private bicycle, often dented and rusty. All jostling, renegotiating, hawking, barking, from one end to the other of short and narrow Sudder Street, disgusting yet charming.

Today we woke up after a second go-round of sleep—still trying to fall into sync with India time and out of Seattle time—nestled in each other's arms, generating heat against the chilliest night of the year in Kolkata. Then we quickly pushed through our morning ablutions to stride, rather briskly now (my body's beginning to return to its old strength), back over to Park Street to try pastries at the famed café noted in our *Let's Go* guide, Flurry's, where we now sit writing. The waiters mill about in their milk-tea Nehru shirts while above the expansive bakery counter area and seating section hangs a jungle of hand-cut, folded, and pieced-together Christmas decorations. What a stark contrast to Christmas back home!

There are those who can't understand why we would want to go to India. Some were upset about our going, even depressed—and, of course, worried. The great and almighty worrywart! How could the world possibly survive without someone worrying? What a waste of energy and emotional health. Why, indeed, would we want to go to India! Why of course to throw all our friends and relatives out of kilter, especially to make people worry! But really! Consider our interests in the East, in the philosophies, spiritual practices,

literature, and foods of the East. Consider Fran's interest in, devotion to, and professional career in yoga as it derives from the East. Consider how necessary it is to throw oneself out of kilter, to startle oneself back into a heightened condition of awareness, to enhance perspective and appreciation of one's own country and culture and freedoms, and of one's own life back home. Fran and I have prospered in recent years, acquired two homes, better careers, and new friends, and we continue to shape our lives as we dream them—all the more reason to throw ourselves out into this fantastical and difficult world that we might appreciate our lives for what they are and not grow complacent. We need to remind ourselves face to face that there is pain and struggle in progress and growth such as ours and beauty and love, even happiness, in the filth and chaos of the "Third World" of India.

***Faith***

*Faith is thinner than it appears*
*in the face of money and death.*

Life isn't always about knowing or naming, changing, making, or possessing, but also about seeing—seeing deeply—and seeing with feeling.

Evening pours down between the buildings of Kolkata to battle with the meager lights of street and establishment. Crows cool their raucous voices; buzzards hover silently against the sky, which grows darker and darker blue till the first star emerges beside the half moon. Growls and buzzes and honks and dings of intimate traffic seem to coagulate and resonate as evening

thickens. We wait on a bench downstairs in the open lobby of the Hotel Maria, having already checked out, waiting for Laura, our connection here in Kolkata, sister of a yoga student of Fran's in Seattle. She's conducting research here for her master's, studying the impact of poverty on women and minorities in West Bengal. Young, bright, adventuresome, and purposeful—I admire such directedness at such a young age, such right-heartedness and wisdom. Meanwhile, the night crashes down about our heads; the birds of carrion hover with eyes peeled for death below. The world cannot cease to amaze me.

Meanwhile, Iqbal Hussein made his way through dark and door and friend till he was sitting on the bench in the hotel lobby between Fran and me—a poet, we find out, and soon he was standing up in front of us reciting several of his, thankfully short, rhymed, metrical poems—amazingly, in English. Fran exclaimed, "If you come to America, you can get a job writing poems for Hallmark cards!" He beamed with anticipation and pride. Meanwhile, Fran had told the story of a homestay student who lived with us once in Seattle, to Raju, the hotel clerk, and he wanted me to recite the draft of the poem I wrote that day about her, but every time I was about to begin, he was called away to tend to some matter at the desk. Meanwhile, Iqbal proceeded to dredge up yet another Hallmark poem. Then Laura and—not at all anticipated—Professor Maiti (we presumed), Laura's graduate advisor in India, whom we were supposed to call the evening before, strolled in amidst all the dubious literary commotion. Introductions were made, then Raju was standing before me ready to hear me recite my still-in-progress poem, which I finally got out—so fitting to this first meeting with the very literary Professor Maiti who, regardless of the quality of the poem, was clearly, deeply pleased to witness

such real-life poetry in action! So fitting to Kolkata, too, the intellectual headquarters of India.

***Afraid***

*Hated music,*
*was afraid of butterflies,*
*came and went,*
*without wings*
*and without a voice.*

Then we toddled over to Jojo's for dinner where, with my head in smoke, I leaned forward farther and farther, straining to make out Professor Maiti's speedily slurred accent, complicated by large quantities of food falling out of his mouth. I don't think I followed a quarter of what he had to say, which was quite a lot, actually, about various famous Indian writers and other important figures in the social sciences. Quite a charming fellow, who obviously adores Laura and young people, who smokes incessantly, who was concerned that, as a Hindu, he was the only one of the four of us who ordered a non-vegetarian (meat) meal, who gave me the name of a noted Bengali poet he insisted I contact at the Indian Coffee House in the College Street area of Kolkata when we return in March. It was a delightful evening—a literary incident, really, though we never discussed any actual works.

# The Train to Puri, Orissa

**January 8, 2001.** Chains are the number one commodity sold in the great and ominous platform bay of Kolkata's Howrah Station, for securing luggage against rampant theft on trains. But we didn't buy one. We're always riding the edge between risk and safety, not wanting always to play it safe. To approach adventure conservatively, we agree, is to buffer oneself against adventure. On the train, under the seat, which is also the lower bunk, we find cables to which we can lock our packs. But of course, as comfortable as I felt physically on my lower bunk that night, my sleep was vigilant: I woke regularly at sounds, or at no sounds at all, throughout the night, peering at cracks of light framing the curtain, feeling below to see that our packs were still there and intact. Still, it was a successful first leg of our train journey—no apparent threat to our belongings, though we continued to discuss buying a chain. Nazim, the Sikh who owns Jojo's in Sudder Street, warned us about the trains in and around Varanasi, a city we would be visiting toward the end of our journey. There's a big theft problem there: Nearing Varanasi he and his family had had their bags stolen right out from under them.

Beyond security concerns, we had a delightful time rocking and rolling on our Kolkata-to-Puri train, slowly stopping and starting at out-of-the-way towns and villages. We woke the next morning to watch the red-orange ball of the sun rise up through the dust of East India. We had entered the agricultural state of Orissa. Fields and green paddies, palm trees and bougainvillea, dogs and cows and exotic birds, especially several species of egrets hunting in the green-tufted waters of paddies, or flying, some with green breasts and white wings, from one stalking grounds to another. Villages with a single hard-packed red-clay street, woven huts, villagers already up brushing their teeth or squatting in fields, and the train, on schedule, rocking through, passing them by, and no one seemed to notice.

All of a sudden we arrived in Puri. Folks in our carriage hurriedly pulled bags and kids together to detrain. Fran and I trailed after them, like question marks, afraid the train might pull out again before we could get off. As we set out on the long platform into town, the two of us were immediately accosted by bicycle rickshaw drivers. Fran intuitively rejected the first and then accepted the second, a man who made small talk as we neared the station and the road beyond. We followed him till, abruptly, he ran up ahead and rolled out an old beat-up rickshaw, which, with bags, books, and bodies—some four-hundred pounds, we figured—we mounted and squeezed into and our man strained to make roll, pushing at first, then jumping up on the seat to pedal. But, alas, we had a flat tire, so, without hesitation, he rented, on the spot, another rickshaw, from another driver looking for a fare, and we stepped from the one to the other and resettled, more organized and comfortable this time, and off we headed for Hotel Z on Chakratirtha Street, near the beach. At the slightest incline, our driver jumped back

off to push, then, as we crested the hill, leapt back on to pedal again. Sweat poured from his brow, though it was cool and only a seven-minute journey. But he was quite enthusiastic for the twenty rupees we agreed on at the station. At about forty cents US, we were probably inflating the Indian economy.

# A Note on Prices

Let me touch on prices: At our first, last ditch, late-night-arrival hotel in Kolkata, we had to pay 650 rupees for quite a fine room, though it had nary a working shower, let alone anything like hot water, which the management boasted it included. The room was without windows, and though it appeared to be clean, the floor was coated with a thin layer of soap or soft wax, not at all pleasant under bare feet, before and after taking a shower or lying on the bed. The staff were just plain weird, probably accustomed to Indians and Bangladeshis only. The first clerk was overweening, and the errand man regularly pestered us, often ringing our obnoxious doorbell, to fetch something—anything—for us, even begging us for a tip, despite the fact that we never asked anything of him. Thus we were glad to move to a hotel in the center of Sudder Street, where earlier we had located a rather dirty double-room with toilet and cold shower for 250 rupees (less than six dollars). It was adequate, though the bathroom could have used a detailed cleaning, the staff were pleasant if not fun, and no one bothered us. Almost all the residents there were from the West, but some were from Nepal, we found out, like Raju the desk clerk, who became our acquaintance. Meals tend to run from about 75 cents to about

two dollars and 50 cents for the two of us. A liter of water in Kolkata was ten rupees, which we can buy here in Puri for five.

# Puri, Orissa

We've taken a double room without attached bath and toilet at Hotel Z in Puri, on Mathatirtha Street, where the Westerners hang out. The hotel is the once-upon-a-time residence of the Maharaja of Puri and is immaculate, painted all in bright white, of course. The staff are quite professional, attuned to needs without being obtrusive. And for all this and more we're paying 300 rupees a night, about seven dollars.

Yesterday, it seemed, we were tired, moving in slow motion. All we did was walk up and down Mathatirtha Street, ascend to the roof of our hotel for the expansive view of the sea and the great Jaganath Temple to the north, and wander down to the beach, where I decided not to swim, as it was already getting cool at three o'clock. After all, it was the middle of winter.

On the beach, we met a wiry, dark-skinned young man with a square jaw and flashing eyes, a fisherman from the adjacent fishing village, whose name was Zachariah. Because I showed so much interest in what he did, he began telling told us a fishing story. One day he and his brother were fishing about seven kilometers off shore. They had tied their fishing lines around their waists and were eating rice for lunch when suddenly Zachariah felt a powerful tug at his waist, then was

yanked right out of his seat and, with a thump, right out of their tiny sisal-lashed, two-timber boat. He splashed into the sea, was pulled under, down, down, till his brother got hold of his backup line and managed to haul him in close enough that he could throw a hand over the gunnel and climb back in. The fish was still on Zachariah's line. They untied the fishing line from Zachariah's waist and gave the fish all the line they had on their backup spool, tiring the fish out. Zachariah's brother sliced his hand on the whirring line and was bleeding heavily. Finally, they got the fish near the boat, but even then it charged fiercely this way and that under the hull, slicing both young men's hands as they held the line. Zachariah finally succeeded in gaffing the giant tuna, and they secured it to the side of the boat. When they weighed it back on shore, in the village, it weighed 30 kilograms, or 72 pounds. Zachariah himself couldn't have weighed more himself. He sold it on the beach for 2200 rupees, or 44 dollars, the most money he'd ever made on a single fish.

Despite the fact that Zachariah couldn't even write his own name, in any language (but spoke four), he recited this whole story, with a minimum of English vocabulary, in vivid detail and with riveting suspense.

Last night we slept inside our first mosquito net of the journey. Fran exclaimed, "I love using the mosquito net, even if there aren't any mosquitoes!" She went on to explain how, when she was little, she had always wanted a canopy bed. All her girlfriends had them—which she told her mother. In reply, her mother always snapped, "Who do you think you are, a little princess?"

***Mosquito Net Fantasy***

*for Fran*

*Gauze fortress.*
*Royal palanquin.*

*Room inside a room*
*inside a room.*

*Love nest.*
*Play house.*

*Sloop rocking*
*in a watery light.*

*We fly up over India,*
*Persia, Egypt, Morocco,*

*on the magic carpet*
*of your dreams.*

## Letter to a Friend

*Dear F.C.,*

*I have to admit I was a bit taken aback by your comment that "traveling is a selfish act." I suppose that would be true if as humans we were meant to go through life empty of external and worldly experience, if to travel did not enrich the mind and soul, and if an enriched mind and soul were worthless to our children and friends.*

*On the other hand, a family man should feel no obligation to travel, likewise no need to justify not doing so to a friend.*

*Besides, some might consider getting an advanced education, reading a book, or writing a story to be selfish acts in relation to raising a child. Still, there are those who consider having children, when there are over six billion people on our ever-shrinking planet, to be a selfish act. I do not. I do not consider any of the above-mentioned acts to be inherently selfish. We do what we choose to do, hopefully with full cognizance when we choose.*

*I believe that you have chosen well and that I have chosen well. You are a richer man for having moved to Boston and taken a full-time job teaching there and for undertaking to write a novel, and I am a richer man for traveling to strange and difficult worlds and writing poems. If we did not each choose differently and share our diverse experience, we could not be such good friends to each other.*

*As always, your friend, Rick*

**January 9, 2001.** On the beach, the touts (aggressive street solicitors) come at us from all angles, with all manner of goods and services. They drive down upon us one after another, barefoot on the sand, like the bad guys in an electronic game, as we walk along the edge of the surf. We shoo them, we ignore them, we give them the evil eye, we walk deeper into the surf, we tell them we're having a romantic walk and want to be left alone. Still they come at us blowing conches, dangling gobs of pearl and coral necklaces, opening before our averted eyes hand-cut palm-leaf manuscripts depicting sexual acts, massaging our prospective bodies in the air before us, nodding persuasively, certain we'll succumb. Meanwhile, the sun droops nearer the bottom of the beach, the air grows orange, the benign blue

waves break and swirl around our ankles. Other locals and tourists go about their business on the beach. In other words, we have a good walk just the same. At worst, I think the touts are like flies, only we're not shit.

Now the beggars are an altogether different story. At Jaganath, the God of the Universe Temple, they, too, came at us like flies, only with whimpering indecipherable voices, with hands eaten away by leprosy, stubs minus pigment. There were others with twisted and broken limbs. We wondered if it's true that parents or pimps break their limbs on purpose to bring in income. And Fran saw her first case of elephantiasis—a truly horrendous example to behold. The beggars stuck to us like shadows as we worked (shopped) the fabric stalls looking for an Indian shawl for Fran. Or they stuck out a revolting stub so we had to dodge like football players not to brush against certain disease. I may succumb to ignorance here, but no one can convince me leprosy isn't contagious.

Here at Hotel Z (Zed), we've met Jeffrey and partner Mary Ellen, Americans from Minneapolis. They have shifted gears in their lives from, in his case, writing architectural history articles and books, and, in her case, working in the book-printing business, to together collecting and importing antique textiles and fabrics to the United States. Their main interest is in breaking into and anticipating this relatively unknown, undeveloped, and hopefully great potential market. He's a lively, rather flamboyant, very knowledgeable, non-practicing Jew, she a warm, confiding, down-to-earth type. They both smoke, handing giant joints back and forth, both are engaging—interesting and interested—and both have been very helpful. We may well stay in touch.

**January 10, 2001.** The silver-headed crow has its eye on the world. Nothing escapes its vigilance, not death-throe, not the coconut husk a vender throws over his shoulder, not the movement of cat, dog, cow, or human. The eagle, if, after its long noble glide, it lands in a tree or on a cornice, can find no peace. Crows from all around Puri gather to harass and draw attention to this alien presence. For two nights now they have screamed, yelled at, and mocked the poor tired eagle who has flown across the Bay of Bengal and seeks a rest in a tree above our window. Late into the night and before the sun rises the crows sustain their ruckus. The eagle can find no rest with crows around.

It's good to know that flies and mosquitoes and other bothersome flying insects have to watch out too. In the shrubs near our Peace Restaurant breakfast table, the spiny-backed lizard lurks, motionlessly biding its time for the unwitting winged creature to take a moment's refuge beneath a leaf—till a tongue unsprings to wrap it up in oblivion.

Chandu owns and operates the Peace Restaurant, which is just down Chakratirtha Road from Hotel Z. He strikes me as an elegant, sophisticated man of Aryan descent, who is old enough to remember the hippie days in Puri. He was astonished at the hippies' free-flowing, light-hearted lifestyle, that they could go a month without bathing. When he bought the neighboring restaurant and decided to move to the present location, he was at a loss as to what to name it, so he wrote some of his old hippie friends abroad, explaining his concept for the restaurant. When one suggested "Peace," he knew it was just right—hence the Peace Restaurant, reflecting one of the central principles of the hippie movement. Likewise,

on the beach, there's the ubiquitous cabaña restaurant and cantina that forever plays reggae music and where pot smoke wends its way up into the infinitely cerulean sky.

What more can we have than our deepest, farthest-reaching perceptions—those we understand but personally reject and those we comprehend *and* philosophically embrace? I see the inherent beauty and internal logic of religion or of making money for money's sake, but I personally reject both. Yet, strangely, I cannot see the warp of time or a subatomic particle such as a quark, but I like to think I can extrapolate from reality—that I can perceive—that these theoretical realities do indeed exist.

I lie on the beach beside my wife, a body containing a heart that pumps life-giving blood throughout, to a brain that perceives or believes, that creates the new work or solves the age-old problem, that processes information and otherwise runs the body that persists in its mute throbbing under the hot sun. I lie here virtually non-existent in the relative expanse of the universe, yet my existence, my sense of my existence—how much I can, at least in mind, extend myself beyond myself—is all I have. I am infinitely closer in size to a grain of sand upon which I lie than I am to any star—which in turn looks no bigger than a grain of sand from here. The span of my life is closer in duration to that of the fly that lands on our beach blanket than the life span of a planet. Only my imagination can stretch to embrace the ideas of eternity and infinity, since my body, in its limited form, can only participate directly in time and space and never really step outside physical reality, as it *seems* the mind can. So we are capable of a sort of greatness as

we lie unmoving on the beach at Puri. We can tell the tout to move along while understanding and respecting him too. We can look askance at the aspiring young Western guru blessing the heads of innocent local Hindus and chuckle at his vanity and understand that the ego needs spiritual affirmation too. A tiny spot on the beach where we lay down our bodies, beneath the simmering sun and beyond the reach of the surf, is its own vast universe within which the ever-expanding mind can fly.

The spirit of the beast in the city. Oxen pull a pole cart. A Brahma bull pulls giant wooden wheels. The dog, the pig, the goat, the crow give burial to tons of garbage. Pigeons coo outside the window in the morning, doves peck barren earth, birds of carrion work the rooftops. The red-assed monkey darts between wheels and legs for the other side of the street. Look at all the fish and shellfish fishermen pour out of nets onto the beach! A lizard waits patiently on a fence post for the unsuspecting butterfly. The cat keeps its eyes peeled for dog and rat alike. The spirit of the beast. The tough little English sparrow. The spirit of the beast. In us, all around us, flying overhead, darting between our legs, at our shoulders, shoulder to shoulder, beast to beast.

# The Train to Bhubaneswar, Orissa

**January 11, 2001.** We're sitting on the Puri to New Delhi Express, about to leave for Bhubaneswar, an hour and a half away, where we'll take a room near the station and see the sights—the many carved stone temples central to the great Orissan Empire of about 900 years ago. We've just taken any old seats on a second-class carriage and are wondering if the conductor will let us stay. We're not sure how the trains work, which cars we can ride without reservations on our Indrail passes—ah, the dull warmth of confusion, the freedom to fall back on our ignorance as foreigners, the necessity, sometimes, despite our constant imperative to be vigilant, to throw our hands up in the air like birds and succumb to the flock. The train begins to roll and a roar goes up: a group of pilgrims and monks going to Jaganath, Temple of the God of the Universe. Soon the Indian countryside flies by, palm trees, fields, rice paddies, snowy egrets.... We ride undisturbed, unquestioned.

**January 12, 2001.** But within minutes on the train back to Bhubaneswar, a conductor came by, checked our passes, seemed

pleased we were taking his India rail system so seriously, and seemed content also to let us sit where we were. Then we were joined by a sixteen-year-old pre-med college student on his way to classes in Bhubaneswar, then an India Rail administrator, who pegged us—especially Fran—with lots of questions and who was certain America had become totally machine-oriented. Of course, I tried to explain how many Americans are seeking alternative lifestyles and approaches to the material and spiritual worlds in our country—the return to simple living, for example—but he seemed a bit skeptical. I suggested that we seem to be moving toward the temple of the earth and they toward the temple of the skyscraper. Then we were joined by yet three more college boys, all of whom were respectful and interested as well as informative.

# Bhubaneswar, Orissa

Aside from its ancient Orissan Empire temples, Bhubaneswar is a rather innocuous town. Still, the temples are stunning—and indeed ancient, with a capital A. The Lingaraj temple is off limits to non-Hindus, such as the likes of us, but we wandered around the stone wall that surrounds the grounds, visiting less notable but no-less-old and finely carved peripheral structures outside the central compound. When we found the British-made platform overlooking the grounds, with a view of Hindus making their pujas, we were, as expected, accosted by the ever-more-ubiquitous register and donation con. This time, now that we had read about this scam in our guidebook, I put it to the test. Fran ignored the suspected perpetrators and headed toward the platform while I put up an argument. When the guys became argumentative themselves, I played my bluff and said, "Okay, let's just go to the temple office and find out if this money goes to temple maintenance, if they even know you guys are over here collecting money." One simply shut up and gave a shit-eating grin. The other older, wiser man said, "It's okay, no problem, go on up!" No one bothered us after that. I told Fran that these guys don't know how to play poker very well, then

proceeded to take pictures of the unfortunately backlit temple structure—with total inquisitive freedom—and without guilt.

But we were totally redeemed when, passing up one other temple of note, we arrived at Mukteswar temple. Much smaller, it is described as being the oldest (9th century) and finest of the bunch. Its ornamental arch, standing before the entry to the main structure, is perfectly intact, with figures of women and animals in finest and smoothest detail—all carved from pink to ochre stone. We were allowed to enter the temple, too, to view the lotus and lingam inside—and were of course accosted again by some fellow as we were about to exit, again with the register and a veritable demand for a donation. We argued little and simply brushed past him. The keeper confirmed our belief that donations were not mandatory. An older fellow gestured to us to enter the Shiva temple nearby, which we did, but, barefoot as we were, we were disgusted by the smell of pigeon and bat shit on the floor, the stickiness underfoot. I wiped my feet on the grass outside—vigorously—for a minute or two, trying to remain vigilant about not getting sick in India or picking up a parasite.

Outside the temple, the insistent horns, the language of horns, the language of hands on horns. Growls of vying motors, squeaks of relenting brakes. Endless acceleration and deceleration through a busy intersection—with an actual traffic light! Then, back in our hotel, sounds of televisions and radios blaring high-pitched nasal female voices and the suave undertones of answering male voices. I hear the watery sloshing of a bather just beyond the wall in our attached bath, snorting to clean his or her inner as well as outer self. I hear a washer of clothes, slapping slacks or sari on concrete floor—wringing water, splashing, gurgling, sneezing, hacking, spitting.... Voices,

unrecognizable languages, echoing from rooms throughout the hotel, as if noise were sacred, a comfort, yet I, yet I.... How do I overcome this speechlessness—of being too much here, too swept up by these sounds as I close my eyes, as I lie on my back beside the reading Fran.

Oh let's have one last adventure before we go to bed. Let's wander back over to Suruchi for another South Indian thali (set meal), buy oranges and biscuits for breakfast....

Kovi means poet, in Hindi! I found this out from Prasad and Khan in the Madhuban Bar and Restaurant where we ended up. Great guys!

**January 13, 2001.** Sinking in. Gradually I'm lost in the ceaseless clamor of India. And I'm speechless against the incessant motions and noise, the reverberant and dusty colors of clothing and jewelry, brown skin, flashing eyes and teeth. And so I think I must sink into chaos in order to hear myself from where I am. I cannot place a word against the pulse of life in this beautiful, self-defeating madness, as it seems to my senses, but must ride the words, each word out of the labyrinth of the mundane and sublime all mixed up in a day or a night, only to sink back in, accept—and embrace—what I gain in my abandonment—and in my loss, too. There are no ivory towers to climb and view the world removed below, only the pit of survival and dreams. My pen is a tiny light, a thin paddle in a flood in which I drown. To write is all, more than I can possibly undertake to do—and to write is nothing, no more than swatting a mosquito in my sleep.

Still, to swat mosquitoes—or shoo them away—may become a careful discipline, much as I render each letter, each word, sentence, and paragraph with a certain minuscule precision,

aiming for eternity, at some stone-like permanence, a lifelong smoothing and shining of the beckoned-for mirror. Everything matters as much as nothing matters. I choose the insistence of the concrete: the mosquito.

For fifteen minutes in our room the sun shines down between our hotel and the building next door, a reverent fissure between two going concerns. For fifteen minutes the sun shines on four of the thirty-two panes of our windows, migrating from the right edge to the left, a short bright day in the pale mid-day night of our room within a room. My perspective is quickened: Already a day has passed, yet I have not entered the monstrous blinding room of the world outside that contains this small one inside. But sometimes I must settle for less light in order to appreciate the greater; I must lie on the bed and let course through my mind the images of the day before. Or out of the pattern of light and dirt on the window make out the figure of a tiny white man in a brick red sky, holding up his hand, pointing at a carpet made of light, a kind of waking dream of the open eyes. At the front of fifteen minutes there's an endless dawn, at the end of fifteen minutes an eternal dusk, and in between the fleeting whimsy of a prophetic image.

There must be something like freedom, though it must necessarily be relative, to support the poor flagellated word, to give the existence of the word credence. I float intentionally through dirty, chaotic India. I built, with great intention, the springboard from which I sprang into this meditative oblivion. I have turned my eyes, with a sort of discipline, every day more and more, on springing out into this orbit of enhanced and renewed perspective. The will, then, and its rewards, is the only freedom for a relatively—politically—free man. For what I can

see clearly, for what I can choose with fullest consciousness—free of subversive sway. For what I can build that is a sure reflection of my natural self. For what I can overthrow that grows stale or outmoded or that I realize is false, I make myself as free as I can humanly become, without severing myself from the physical world, without striving to live without depending on the earth beneath my feet, the light upon my eyes, the air I breathe, the water I drink, the bread I eat, the love to which I abandon myself. Beyond which I am free to say yes or no. And even to these fundaments I am free to say no, but there is no freedom in death; there is not even nothing.

Ah, here it is, the park the book never said was here, the park I just knew had to be here in Bhubaneswar (for what kind of world would we have to live in in which there is a city in which there is no park). It's down the avenue from the train station, across the street from the post office, in the center of town, of course! Beckoning shadows of green, a green expanse in the middle of a hot dry city. No smoking, reads a sign. Do not pluck the flowers. Throw waste materials in the dustbins. And I add: Not open during work hours. No riffraff allowed (I like to think we're not riffraff, though we may be members of the untouchable caste). Here's a cool green place to stretch and breathe. Locals dressed for the occasion walk along the paths, waiting for the sun to set, a chance to memorialize the day. Foreigners still command a stare; we stand out from afar. Two high school girls stop us to interview us with a few prepared questions. Satisfied, they go off giggling. The tough low grass strains to stay green as dry winter air persists, giving up all together under the frequent footfall, along the obvious vectors, the direct routes in the midst of leisure, the straightest

way back to the "keep up" and "get ahead" world outside the gate. Families, couples, clusters of young men, pairs of young men holding hands, two rare young women in flashy Western dress escorted by two young men in sports clothes, brothers or cousins, as suggested by the way they walk in unison behind. The solo working man, wise to break from paperwork to walk about for a few minutes—better, certainly, for men in this frenetic country than smoking. The sun slowly sinks into red haze. The park begins to glow orange, adding a heartwarming asterisk to a hot blue day.

How much detail must I observe? How closely must I look? How much information must I gather, to come to my conclusions, to have my insights, to support my views? How many times realize what a man hawking and spitting when he sees me means in this country (or in any country)? How much evidence of cultural evolvement—how many clever, psychologically convincing billboards or commercials, how many women wearing pants and riding scooters must I register to reaffirm the obvious, that India is changing? One must, it seems, continually prove oneself to oneself. And as much as I strive to accept my place in the world, I'm no exception.

# Chennai (Madras), Tamil Nadu

**January 15, 2001.** We're now waiting in the lobby of the New Victoria Hotel for Anita and David, who, according to our calculations should be arriving any minute, that is, if what Fran wrote down is their correct flight arrival time. Seven years have passed since we last saw Anita, and, of course, we've never met David. How easy will dropping into South India be? How easy will India be on Anita, who is half Indian and is traveling with a European? Where will they want—or not want—to stay or visit? What will they want—or not be willing—to eat? What do they expect out of this journey with us, in yet another foreign land? Fran's nervous, can't read, is shaking her foot (which she razzes me for doing); begins walking about the lobby, checking in the restaurant. As I say, seven years have passed since she and Anita have seen each other. Fran and Anita were once tight college roommates. How will they appear to have changed in each other's eyes? Time is the great qualifier.

Finally they arrive and, after much embracing, introductions, and deciding what to do, we return to our hotel, where they also take a room.

We linger, completely ourselves, in the fanned veils of air—in the cooling shadow—of our room, in eddies of remembering and anticipation, in recesses of perspective, as in a cave in the side of a cliff, but with French windows, a telephone, a line to some other elsewhere, the summery winter light filtering in, the rumbling and buzzing motors accelerating, the beeps and honks of traffic echoing in, nowhere and everywhere to go. Time billows up in sunny amorphous clouds and me with it. I am softening, stretching out, growing lank, diffusing. I find I can still let go of all—of the past, the future; what I have, what I don't have; what I've done, what I haven't done. I begin to see again, the detail, the embellishments, of everyday life. My ears seem to stretch, to catch all the sounds I've trained them to ignore as I've given them to so many external and internal demanding voices, to the distant dream, the cavernous silence of music, some one aim of sound, of tone, of melody, of brilliance in vibration—that destroys, too, that steals away the secret life about me. I forsake the violin for ten weeks. I forsake my writing goals, my work responsibilities with which I otherwise lash myself daily. One must cast oneself into the writhing pits of experience to return with diamonds of light and rubies of melody, to the roots of experience. I love the rain of experience. I remove the clothes, the fine but alien clothes with which I am encrusted and drenched.

***To Indian One-handed Cuisine***

*All your myriad dishes—*
*curries and dahls and sweet rice,*
*pickles and peppers and curds—*
*arrive before me*
*on a banana leaf.*

*I am reconstituted*
*via my burning mouth.*
*I come and go*
*like any other Indian,*
*participate in the plumbing,*
*move food from plate to palate*
*with my right hand only.*
*My left I save for the other cycle—*
*of Shiva. I am an oddity*
*in the way I must fit,*
*in the way I must survive*
*at the table with others.*
*I am my own cycle,*
*participating in two distinct Indian cycles.*
*My right hand juggles the fresh, the prepared,*
*the boiled, baked, or steamed,*
*tagged with the distinction of the region, the ages,*
*the pungent, the sharp, the sweet,*
*my left hand washing away*
*the evidence of my existence,*
*my participation in the putrid, the parasitic,*
*the malodorous and maggot infested.*

*And may the right hand and the left*
*never shake hands in holy matrimony*
*or in any other union, sacred or secular,*
*may the right hand please the palate,*
*the disciplined but caved-in stomach,*
*and the left attend to the great but*
*particular nostrils of the subcontinent.*

And how do I learn to throw trash again? What must I undo? A lifetime of ever-stronger environmentalism and tree-hugging, of saying no to bags at the store, of looking about for trash cans, of pocketing a wrapper till I find one or till I get home, even of picking up someone else's thoughtlessly -thrown trash and dispensing with it, going so far as to tap that thoughtless thrower of trash on the shoulder and tell him or her he or she seems to have dropped something. Much of a lifetime separating bottles and cans and paper and the unrecyclable into designated containers and placing them street-side. Ever-growing irritability, disappointment, sometimes rage, even, at trash thrown thoughtlessly, carelessly, stupidly, even rebelliously, in city, park, forest, and field—even in crystal stream. Two weeks of resisting the temptation here in India, of throwing a wrapper, of at least finding the apparently allotted corner or curb or wall where the village, the town, or the neighborhood throws its garbage. Overcoming the balking hand, the clenching fingers, everything I've come to be made of in that final instant when I am finally able to throw that wrapper by the undesignated wayside. Wholly unraveled, undone, some invisible appendage severed, naked, de-civilized, a degree more savage somehow, sold out, helplessly trashier.

Not my favorite stuff, trash, not my favorite subject, by any means, yet here it is, in India, sifting, piling, slowly rotting or not rotting at all, on city streets, in gutters, ditches, along roads, railroad tracks, in vaguely designated corners in cities or heaps in villages, being gulped down by cows and goats, sifted through by the starving and by small children: bottles, cans, paper, animal remains, husks of coconuts, but mostly—and worst—plastic—plastic mineral water bottles, grocery bags, lids, teacups, and paan (chewable stimulant combining betel

leaf, areca nut, and tobacco) wrappers with foil. Here is where they really need to begin recycling. There are isolated streets, districts, villages, and cities where programs of one sort or another have been implemented, but the work, assuming it'll ever really get seriously underway, has hardly begun. There's no consciousness, no infrastructure, no money. I've seen members of every class, caste, religion, and ethnic group completely unconsciously drop trash. But the conscientious can afford only so much rage. I certainly couldn't travel through India for ten weeks being mad at the people, the whole country, for behaving like slobs, for calling this temple and that river sacred then dumping tons of garbage in or around it. It's a real test of the spirit for the expectant and informed traveler. Trash is not really a problem with which India has made progress since I traveled here twenty-one years before. I'd suggest the opposite. Now that more foods and products are mass-produced and packaged, Indians have more trash to deal with, as compared to a time when what they produced they sold or bartered as is. The country has so much to gain by "cleaning up" and developing pride in a clean, neat, regulated India. India could become the greatest tourist attraction on Earth, and Indians could fill their coffers with some of that global money. A good many people could be put to work by the government and by businesses, picking up, scrubbing, painting—for example, some of those idly occupied ledger keepers.

We've taken a small room at a mom and pop hotel in Chennai. It's a fortress for the mind, overlooking the night, looking back on the day, for reviewing a lifetime. A room is a structure for recapitulation, for hammering out myths and secret legends, for putting a few words in order. The curtain

becomes the only view, the painter's undulation, love given easy substance, so the eyes can move away, forget, then remember again—a simple, cheap, innocuous curtain, swaying at the bidding of a fan. The room is the box the body seeks, the walls it pulls up around itself, the ceiling it pulls up over itself, to close out the distant, the infinite, the eternal stars. Our floor is a full flight of stairs above the wicked earth below. The room is a box on a pedestal, on a stem—a flower, with pistil and stamen, sepal and scented petal, a box of dreams, a cage where the bird of the mind flies free to sing, a podium for invisible words, an amplifier for outer space, a giant paint-muffled megaphone in which I write. A room is the clearest definition of a place. The thicker the walls are, the sharper the vision is; the higher the floor, the smaller the passersby below; the meaner the windows, the more versatile the door, the denser the language. In a tiny room the nerves get lost. The eyes roam in their aimless labyrinths, and love swells at the pen's bidding. A light insanity is a room, a clot of joyous confusion in warmth and immobile rebellion; it's one world stumbling over another in a tiny but an infinite void.

## January 17, 2001

### *Breasts of Stone*

*Breasts of stone, blood of dye,*
*seas and deserts of wind-blown plastic,*
*caught under plastic manure.*

*Sun of stone, gods of paint,*
*dolls of gods hanging as in a shooting gallery,*
*hanging in a trinket shop.*

*Seas of plastic sifting like sand*
*through tribal village.*
*The planet waits. The stars observe.*

*The greatest questions lie unanswered*
*in the dirt, turning hard as wood,*
*like a rat flattened under an overloaded bus.*

*Politicians spout in Hindi and Tamil,*
*in any language, and the townspeople,*
*chins on hands, grow savvy, grow leery.*

*The night darkens.*
*The crickets sing, happy as ever.*
*Breasts of stone, blood of dye.*

*The sea inhales,*
*then exhales.*
*The curtains bow out, bow in.*

*Dolls of gods*
*wail with immobile mouths*
*and hollow bodies*

*while monkeys peer*
*sleepily*
*through glistening leaves.*

See no, hear no, speak no evil—postmodern irony of once-sincere admonition. How serious can the critical, the political, poet be? Here are the great hands of the blind, deaf, and mute, hands that have the earth, so-called civilization, by the throat. Religion fails, politics seem nigh on to infantile, the dialectic process eternally slow. See no, hear no, speak no evil. Most of

six billion people with hands over eyes, ears, and mouth? Like monkeys, like hungry dogs, like dead fish, food for bacteria. How can the mind even conceive of Paradise, write of Eden as if in a mirror reflecting our farthest-reaching dreams, to walk all the way, but with the mind, back to animal? See no, hear no, speak no evil.

**January 18, 2001.** A leaf falls, in the middle of spring! How lovely, exclaims the aesthetic. How ironic, the second-level thinker blurts. The perfect metaphor! the poet undertones, then commits hara kiri with a dull blade—whose heart is made of the same earth it falls upon. See no, hear no, speak no evil!

# Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu

Last night, sitting out in the garden with Anita and David (who arrived in Chennai on January 15th), there was lots of conversation about the conditions of garbage and tourism in India. When I returned from fetching a liter of water, the others—David, mostly—seemed set on seeking some place other than Mahabalipuram to visit, some place less tainted by tourism and less afflicted by trash. Anita suggested a hill station somewhere. We haven't even gotten down to see the Palavan stone carvings nor made it to the beach, having arrived relatively late yesterday afternoon. I asserted myself by saying that we can't get away from it, the trash particularly, since it's not just tourists throwing trash. If I hadn't been so caught off guard, I might have added that generally all the places worth visiting—that is, places with temples and beaches, have been overrun by tourists, foreign and Indian. I get the impression that David is interested in finding some virgin village, not yet penetrated by development and Western values. Such a place probably would not have accommodations for us—by its very definition. A hill station (where colonialists once escaped the heat), according to what Fran and I have heard and read, will inevitably be cold at this time of year. As much as the Indian

paradise appeals to me, I think it's important—at least for me—to experience India as it is, as the country grapples with its very real problems. Of course, Fran and I are traveling around to get a clear picture of India, good and bad, while Anita and David are here to have a holiday. Lastly, towns like Mahabalipuram have developed for tourism, or for travelers such as ourselves, and we need to a draw a line when it comes to making further inroads to preserved areas. Much as we need to respect our planet by not cutting down all old-growth forests, we also need to preserve traditional culture against universal intrusion and Western development and values.

One god butts another out of the great arena of the Indian psyche: Brahma, for being as good as invisible, by the great god Money; Vishnu by the great god Screen; and Shiva by the great god Garbage. Meanwhile, Hope floats free, as always, in the unexplored recesses of the Indian heart. We Americans fell into our own tiger pit, and so must they, but hopefully they will see the roughly constructed ladder we left behind leaning nearby in the dark and will climb again toward Paradise, as only the unencumbered imagination can envision it. I hold out hope India will see its way out.

The next morning turned light and bright and warm, after the uneasy feelings of last night. As I expected, not only did Anita and David grow accustomed overnight to the ubiquitous garbage, but first the Palavan stone bas reliefs and temple caves, then afterward a walk behind the great granite outcrops into the rural areas beyond—both ameliorated the disappointment and restlessness they felt the evening before. We had a lovely day. Even the shit-strewn rough and tumble beach seemed to please.

We walked down the gritty stretch to the beach temple, which, except for the fence surrounding it, stands in full view, even relatively close up, despite the fact that the government now charges ten dollars to enter the compound and see it up close.

We had dinner at the out-of-the-way Fiesta Restaurant, near our cottage—the delicious grilled pomfret fish and fresh-cut chips enhanced a full evening's conversation. And now Fran and I are hitting the sack early as we intend to get up at six o'clock tomorrow morning for a yoga photo shoot, my intention being to get black and white shots of Fran doing poses with Mahabalipuram's ancient stone carvings as backdrops that she can make use of in the future. Otherwise, plans for the next few days include a visit to the famous beach temple (assuming I can bring myself to pay the blasted ten dollars to enter) and an evening of Indian dance tomorrow, a journey to Vedantangal Bird Sanctuary on Saturday, and then we'll travel to Pondicherry Sunday for the remainder of our visit with Anita and David. We may make a day trip to the temple city of Kanchipuram. Then we'll return to Chennai together, see each other off there, they to Delhi and we by train to Kanyakumari, the very southernmost tip of the subcontinent.

**January 19, 2001.** And if he leave himself to pure desire? If the true positive existentialist satori-filled Zennist prevail upon the bed upon which he abruptly finds himself at hearing a bird chirp beyond the window? Desire may take him nowhere but further and deeper into this very here and now. In the vastness of eternity and the universe, what is an ancient stone to a butterfly? What is a colorful traditional Indian dance to a swaying palm frond? Is it a lesser or greater ruffling of the senses? The sun burns a hole through the wall, through the skull, through gray

matter, to a single enthroned synapse, and light, all the light of reality, pours into the waking mind, and for a moment he is satisfied not to move. Still, it is a kind of work that brings him back to this tiny expansive place in time, a flowing outward that is a flowing inward, the greatest stretch of the mind.

Fran and I hit the road early this morning to do a photographic shoot of Fran doing yoga poses, our first stop the beach. Clouds obscured the sun. Shit and litter lay strewn on the sand. I put black and white film in the camera instead of color. Curious kids, looking about to defecate on the beach, tried to get in the photo. I shot anyway, as Fran struck asanas in a small lashed-together fishing boat pulled up on the beach for the night. Then we traipsed back through the just-waking town to the awe-inspiring Palavan bas relief and adjacent cave temples for which Mahabalipuram is noted. There, as we set up to shoot, just as the sun began to angle in through the worn columns of the cave temple opening, idlers gathered and stood by to watch—to stare. Then a whole tour-bus-full of Muslims poured up into the caves, despite our photographic operation. We inched out past them as they pushed up the steps. A cluster of black-dressed men and their families from Kerala, on a walking tour, stopped to stare as Fran worked through a series of postures against the backdrop of stone gods and monkeys and elephants and birds—the largest bas relief of its kind in the world. We, especially Fran, here in the land of yoga, were much more interesting than any old heap of rock any day!

Fran and I had breakfast at a little cafe near our lodge, beside the beach temple road. An old man with thick glasses and long stubble took our order and commenced to cook and

serve our various dishes one by one, as it seemed he was doing everything himself. He did a good job despite the piecemeal operation. It's amazing what you see when you take a seat beside a busy town road: an older Japanese man buzzing about here and there on a motorcycle; a veritable stick of a beggar, who, as Fran commented, looks as if he should be dead. I replied that the town should take care of him rather than let him beg from tourists and die. And best of all, three medium to large American-made recreation vehicles, one of which had a map of the world on the side depicting where the caravan had traveled in North and South America and Asia. And we spotted a big red-assed monkey ambling along a rooftop. Nearby, a peddler was making a killing selling cheap, brightly checkered plastic tote bags to Indian tourists. And now a bird chirp resonates through every following word, through every later thought, so deeply does it pierce.

And meaning? What about meaning? Can one find meaning in experiencing, more deeply, a bird chirp? Is there hope for the sheer, the mere experientialist? Shouldn't he produce children, make money, do good works, act to save the world? Is raw experience and linguistic juxtaposition enough worth for a life? Shouldn't he become a doctor, a lawyer, or environmental engineer? Shouldn't he support the system that supposedly supports him? No. There is only the beautiful or ugly reflection to create that will put humankind on the true course to possible paradise—at least for me. I may be arrogant, but I'm not vain. I'm willing to crush the self-destructive icon and eat my own shit if I must. Why are we so hard to see? How can we shit in our own eyes and not see the shit? Good and bad do not exist beyond ourselves, so, since Good is within us, why

do we not imagine, agree on, and pursue the Good? Maybe we *are* pursuing the Good. Or maybe I make it all sound too easy. Maybe we're as good as we get.

The traditional Indian dance on the stage in Mahabalipuram is as much for the village goats, who come with no U.S. dollars or traveler's checks, as it is for the tourists. At tonight's performance, the goats ply the upper reaches of the massive stone bas relief of gods, heroes, and beautiful animals, seeking the perfect view, the most comfortable seat on the head of a god or the back of an elephant. Some butt heads with affection, as if not having seen each other all day, since last evening's performance. Meanwhile, the dancer turns a thirty-second libretto into a thirty-minute epic of the gods. Such nuance for the ever-more-appreciative goat! The dancer's fingers and toes are painted red like their horns. Europeans watch with the wise eyes of the West, uncomprehending but appreciative, while Indians come and go along the sidelines, knowing in their bodies the meaning of these ancient filigrees of melody and undulating arms telling stories. High above the scene, a poor mother goat is pinned helplessly to stone by two kids sucking violently at her teats. The goats, it occurs to me—as the dancer beckons and pleads—are the first and last to know God and know God well.

Her hands are leaves falling, small bodies of prayer, each a sinuous storyteller, each a solo, together a duet. Silent centers of music, her fingers taper to the infinity of darkness, filigrees of light like flares in the encroaching night, like red feathers, each doing a tiny dance in the vast black of the universe. For an instant, like a rock set upon the four thin legs of my chair, I drop; I swoon to the dust of earth.

**January 20, 2001.** Vedanthangal Bird Sanctuary was one of the several truly striking experiences I've had since we set out on this journey. Thousands—I like to think millions—of migrating waterfowl come to winter here in the South of India, gliding in to land or taking off with straining wings and dotting—with white and black and all colors between—the trees which like islands grow from Vedanthangal Lake. We arrive before anyone else—so early, in fact, that we have time to drink tea and coffee at a stall in the darkness. We wind up the spiral staircase to the observation tower before the next foreign couple and—fortunately—before several hordes of school children stream up around us as I try to photograph birds, trees, water, and reflections, as the sun slides up from behind a cloud on the horizon. Muthu, our driver (from Mahabalipuram), has joined us for the occasion, despite the fact that, as he admits, he has visited the sanctuary twenty times before. He is as serene as we are when we finally settle on a bench to eat some fruit. I look forward to seeing the photos!

There are spoonbills, little cormorants, white ibises, open-billed storks, darters (snakebirds), gray pelicans, night herons, glossy ibises, and painted storks, to name a few of the migrating birds who roost here, feeding on insects, mollusks, fish, algae, crabs, frogs, tadpoles, and snails. "Liquid guano," as a board in the interpretive center calls it, results from the abundant droppings, accounting for the green color of the water. We learn from our guide that the farmers hereabouts have the richest soil and the most verdant and abundant harvests because they mix the guano into their soil and have done so for centuries. Gabbling, honking, trumpeting, tweeting, cooing, twittering—these birds can't help but gather here, each with its own seasonal address, its own year-older branch upon which

they perch. There are a million birds in this one square mile, so that vast India, with its population of a billion people, seems sparsely inhabited by humans in comparison.

More than anything else my knee has thrown a kink in our plans and daily activities. I don't know if it's an old injury revisiting me, or if I injured it through some forgotten or unnoticed accident I had before we left, or if it's simply a weak spot speaking up against the increasing stress as we were preparing to leave, but it had swollen noticeably and had begun to hurt and stiffen clearly within the week before our departure. I've taken anti-inflammatories, rubbed in heating substances, applied ice, tried to go easy on it, and slowly, slowly, the swelling has gone down some and the tightness and immobility let up. Typically I would traipse all over a city or town, up and down beaches, and throw in a callisthenic or yoga posture or two, but in this regard I've had to remain a bit more sedentary, though I still occasionally put in the three or four mile day. Where I really feel like I'm losing, however, is in Fran's and my plans to put on a multimedia performance in Seattle, which she proposed we do after I read at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle. I feel as if I'm failing our future to some degree, but then a journey such as this is also about not expecting too much, not pushing forward too much, but rather finding our way to some new conclusions.

Traveling in India toughens the psychic hide. Not only does one have to grow accustomed to the trash, the garbage, the shit in the street, in the gutter, in empty lots, in the woods and, worse, on the otherwise beautiful beach, but one also wonders, inevitably, if it's going to be this particular smudged

or still wet glass, this cut of fish, this apparently carefully iodine-soaked and cut vegetable that will bring on vomiting and sick-time in bed. Why do we foreigners travel in such god-forsaken—or god-ridden—places as India? Is it the challenge, the heightened sense of danger, the altogether alien approach to living that, ironically, resembles lives our ancestors led? Traveling in India makes me think differently about the world. Were a spaceship to arrive for the first time on Earth (always with a capital E) in the South of India, its passengers would experience an altogether different world than if the ship were to land in Seattle, Washington. Though there would no doubt be some overlap in their descriptions, their logs would contain completely different entries about social structure, beliefs and rituals, food, transportation, language (of course), and other behavior. In the first case, the touts and beggars would be particularly bothersome, in the second the soliciting and advertising. Not only does traveling in India thicken the hide to the obtrusiveness and dangers inherent in its culture, it also reveals how thick one's hide is to one's own culture. Mine is particularly thick to commercialism and advertising, but it relents to other freedoms (such as peace, quiet, and a functioning infrastructure) and comforts (such as relatively clean food, water, and air). Still, to be able to consciously adjust the thickness of one's hide is a pleasure I indulge in when I travel, though my ability to adjust that knob is not always perfect (haven't gotten sick, so far, this journey).

The German guy sitting nearby in this beachside restaurant reminds me of Mark Howell. What do I remember about Mark Howell? He was my first childhood best friend, I suppose, a friend who was my friend only and not my brother Geoff's

friend too. I suppose that my friendship with Mark was the beginning of Geoff and me growing independent of one another. Mark, in his strong-minded, aggressive-bodied way, was already becoming a man in the fifth through seventh grade. And I was his main competitor and honing stone, being his equal mentally and physically. We strove against each other's As in school, and we learned to play basketball, really, playing one on one together under driveway hoops. He drove hard against me—all elbows and shoulders—while I stole the ball out from under him and jump-shot up over his higher-reaching hands or hook-shot around him faster than he could block. We grew against and with, and to some extent, for one another in the joyous bleakness called childhood. In the end, his family moved away to Salt Lake City to become Mormons, or some such, but not before Mark had dubbed himself "Mad Mike," of fantasy model car building and customizing pseudo-fame. That time was a serious growing spurt for me, I realize now. Come to think of it, the German guy sitting nearby doesn't resemble Mark Howell at all, though I have no idea what Mark might look like now.

# The Taxi to Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu

The journey, via the car and driver the four of us hired, from Mahabalipuram to Pondicherry, was the most pleasant I've ever experienced in India or Nepal. The road was direct and smooth, and our driver, Raman, kept the pedal to the floor most of the way, as there was almost no traffic. I saw very little trash, none along the roads or in the paddies, fields, and groves, but saw lots of pride in the well laid out, carefully groomed farmlands, in the rice paddies, cypress groves, and banana tree orchards along this route. The scattered villages here seem to be more conscious about managing the ubiquitous trash problem.

What I was most struck by—and I think I remember seeing this before—was the way many farmers thresh their rice crops, or at least those who live near the road. As today seems to be the pinnacle of the threshing season (or at least one of them, since, after all, this is January and there must be other crops during the solar year here), farmers are laying the harvested bundles out on the hot road, up to about two feet deep, so the various motorized vehicles—motor rickshaws, taxis, private cars, lorries, public buses—can run over the piles, separating

grain from stem. Once this free service job is complete, the farmers remove the straw for stuffing and feed, then sweep together and re-spread the grain along the edge of—but still on—the asphalt to dry, which is, no doubt, quite hot from the sun. I saw one woman pushing her feet along, in a carefully controlled shuffle through the spread, so as to create furrows to enhance drying—or roasting, as the grain seems to brown—and to turn and mix the layer.

Whereas the laying down and watching over of the yet-to-be-threshed rice plants seems to be the responsibility of the men, the tending of the grain seems to be managed by the women. That is, in the division of labor here in South India, and probably in many parts of the world, the men tend to do the bulk work, in which the product is a crop, and the women the more detailed work, in which the product is closer to food, though, come to think of it, I've seen women doing both jobs in Nepal.

Regardless, all highway threshers must be on their toes to avoid getting hit by speeding drivers with distant destinations on their minds. I did see a few men threshing the old-fashioned way—whipping handfuls of rice plants on the road to speed up the process and to have something to do when traffic is slow; after all, there isn't much traffic today: It's Sunday—and a holiday (Pongal).

# Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu

We rather blew in to Pondicherry, aiming for our pre-selected Park Guest House, where it seems many Aurobindo Ashram devotees stay. It was full to the brim, and the desk clerk was in no hurry to extend an apology for its being full. In fact, he was downright surly. He probably viewed us as simple-minded guru-follower wannabe's. After driving this way and that on the east side of town, looking in the guidebook, checking out other full or objectionable hotels, our driver drew our attention to a private guest house next door to one we were looking at that was full through January. Completely walled in and lush with garden in the front courtyard and with at least two utterly charming rooms, this hidden jewel of hospitality captured us immediately into its cool colonial recesses. Patricia, possibly French-Indian, speaking beautiful French and English, once she learned we were looking to stay four or more days, gave us discounts on the rooms: 2000 rupees instead of 2500 in the case of her once-upon-a-time father's room, with private garden, which Anita and David took; and 1200 instead of 1800 in the case of the smaller, also charming room upstairs, which Fran and I were just as quick to take. Our room had lots of old framed India pictures of gods and artifacts on the walls,

an antique shop worth of colonial furniture, a huge woven sisal carpet, a chain-hung palette for a desk, and a fine double bed with circular gauze mosquito net for our comfort and pleasure—not to mention three fans and a whole gallery of lighting possibilities. I'll have to do a special photo shoot of the rooms and premises. We're definitely over-extending on our budget here, as the food is more expensive on the east side of the town too. But what with it being our final week with Anita and David, and what with Fran and I having six more weeks of travel to tighten our belts, I'm sure we'll manage. This place is just too much fun to pass up! Fran and I are down to 400 rupees cash on a Sunday night, which will limit any extravagance this evening at the French restaurant David and Anita want to indulge in—especially now that Anita is feeling better after her bout with bad fish or whatever it was that got her in Mahabalipuram.

**January 22, 2001.** Sometimes—rarely, even—one stumbles, albeit for only a few days, an hour, an instant of expanding perception, upon Paradise. The sun lifts above the seclusive wall of the guesthouse to touch the lolling leaves of tropical flora. The seemingly happy pregnant maid waters the garden. The Great Dane rests peacefully, noble in his self-appointed, cushioned chair. Fran transfers her ever-growing collection of pressed flowers from one book to another, then proceeds with her reading. And I, after pushing so hard to leave for India and traveling through India never quite finding that perfectly comfortable spot in the Universe, feel my deep exhaustion for what it is, slumber beckoning in my body like sun-warmed stones. I rise like a big lazy fish to the surface of day, gurgle bubbles of contentment, eyelids drooping, and

sink again to rest on the muddy bottom of dead sleep. Or I float on my back at the surface of day, spattered by rays of sunlight and frond shadows, tickled pleasantly by crow caws and bird chirps, and brushed by a rising and falling breeze. Thus I bask in my deep and greatly pleasurable grogginess in the midst of this tiny isolated paradise in the once-upon-a-time French colony town of Pondicherry, India, at the guesthouse of Patricia Michel!

What I cannot penetrate, what I forever approach, forever grasp at, that which falls away that I strain to bring nearer, to swallow and be swallowed by: woman of my life, whom I sleep with every night, whom I fall upon, who falls upon me, whose body fits into mine as mine fits into hers, in the dark, under the sun. Whose smell I carry with me, wherever I go, and whose every angle and line follow me into sleep, into my distant otherworldly dreams. Ever nearer. Yet I strain to pull her closer, to swallow her, to be swallowed by her, to lose myself in her flesh as I would in the sea. As I am drowned in the sound of her breath, I clamor for some sweet death in her bosom.

Likewise the garden, the colorful ancient cultures I sail through like an explorer. Spice smells and print patterns and fruit stacks, all rolling through this dream I call my life, which I strain to take whole, to digest, to make mine before I die. Yet I claw at a great chasm before me, like a butterfly driven by a storm over an endless sea toward a distant scent, a blossom already fluttering to the ground in a never-heard-of country on an ancient, expiring planet. My fingers tear into my own flesh and discover nothing but immature pomegranate seeds, bleeding thinly, what little I can lap up with my innocent but grateful tongue.

I tear long tough ropes of language from my chest, branches of leaves rustling beyond the open doorway I'm sure somehow inform my innocent and isolated soul, as if any old image, any common event were a sign, a signal for the open-eyed, the wildly roving artist of pure experience who seeks the impossible in that which rubs up against the skin—the mosquito, the irritating woman bragging about how little she paid for a room elsewhere, the blackness of the night which nags at the imagination. So much that is peripheral to the focused worker of the world, peripheral to the devotee of Sri Aurobindo or Mother Meera, to the devotee who performs a flower puja upon their common grave. Reality, even amidst the easy morning, the sunlight on a flower, is a storm—it's only a matter of how close I peer. And an infinity of storms pass in a minute, and I'm glad that I can remember this now and then. I question, then, if it is really I who tear such tough ropes of language from my chest.

**January 23, 2001.** Words tall as mountains, light as air—mountains of air, all translatable. The fly on the table grooms its wings, only slightly less complex than a man, given the vastness, the mystery of the world. The writer sits at his table, anchored like a dot, not big or small, submerged in air, buried under light, squirming a little in the great near-motionless flow—what in turn is constant flux, a near static explosion—which is the universe. Building little card mountains of the imagination, lighter than light, yet of similar stuff, a dot of mountains, secretly and unexplainably rising from the plain of the mind.

## January 24, 2001

***India after 21 Years***

*Back in India*
*after 21 years!*
*What happened to me*
*in the meantime?*

*I must have become*
*cleaner, or at least*
*my eyes have.*
*Must have grown slower,*

*or chaos has sped up.*
*The country has laid*
*down some wires,*
*built a few roads,*

*cut back on paperwork:*
*Ah, huge dusty mirror*
*lying on its side*
*beginning to stand up!*

So now we're nearing the end of our last full day at Madame Patricia's residence and guesthouse and in Pondicherry, soon about to join Anita and David for dinner and a birthday and farewell celebration, as both Anita's and my birthday fall in February and we're going to part company tomorrow. Once we return to Chennai by taxi, they'll board a flight to Delhi to visit Anita's dad and her old stomping grounds, Saharanpur

and Mussouri, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, and we'll hold station in Chennai for two nights till we catch our train to the southern tip of the Sub-Continent at Kanyakumari, where the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea meet, where we expect to see the sun both rise and set above the sea. Our stay in Pondicherry has been somehow dreamlike—strange and sleepy, a merging of several worlds and times in a walled-in and leafy oasis away from the vast and dusty land of swarthy South India, where the Sri Aurobindo and Mother Meera Ashram has taken root and the eco-village known as Auroville has been established (the brainchild of Mother Meera), and French restaurants, antique shops, and the French language are the rule and not the exception. The heat, as we near the equator, even in January, adds to the many contrasts, and to my grogginess. I should be romping about the town with my camera as the shadows lengthen and the pastel faces of the buildings intensify, but here I write, under the sanctuary of a fan and the influence of a cool beer.

On Monday we visited the Aurobindo Ashram, that is, what we were allowed to see of it, and experienced how so many people revere Sri Aurobindo and Mother Meera. They stream in to view the very fine rock and cactus garden, dotted with pink fallen blossoms, to appreciate the wide arrays of marigolds, to meditate near or over or even upon their common tomb. Such devotion to the dead, albeit hugely generous, makes me uneasy. If we all could be so strong as to perform good and right acts, we wouldn't have to bathe in others' remembered or imagined light. Let poor Jesus down off his cross. However, the next day, all of us but me—I was flagging due to the heat and needing to stay near the facilities—went to Auroville to see the

Matrimandir, which is a domed edifice of spiritual significance for practitioners of integral yoga, and a film about the eco-village founded by Mother Meera. I wish I'd felt like going, as they were impressed by the ongoing building project of the Matrimandir and the German-produced crystal it houses. The crystal is the symbol of future realizations, a way for visitors to concentrate their attention.

What I did participate in, and was glad to have done so, was a visit for dinner to the Aurobindo Ashram dining room in town. We joined long lines of hungry devotees and tourists waiting till the bell gonged, then slowly filed into the serving room, where our stainless steel trays were filled with "institutional Indian food," as Anita described it. We sat on the floor either side of tiny tables, on woven mats. Some people kept reverently quiet and some spoke in low tones beneath enlarged, touched-up photos of our benefactors. Quotes from these great spirits also could be read on the walls. *Eat to live, don't live to eat* is one I remember. The food was good and the experience pleasant, there where volunteers do the real work, that of providing basic needs to those who have nothing. Though we were not homeless and we had to pay—but very little—I felt privileged to eat there.

**January 27, 2001.** India is too much for my one poor pen. And my old poems embarrass me. So I live in literary limbo, scratching away as if writing were everything and nothing. What is my purpose? To explore purposelessness? To conduct a study on the ontology of writing in the void? Perhaps I've gone too far for my own good in smashing all barriers of belief and possession and delusion. Perhaps infinity and eternity and hard reality are too much for me, for any human being. One

cannot write of nothingness with nothingness. Worse than a house of mirrors is no house, no mirrors, no fundament at all upon which to construct a house of mirrors. Sisyphus, how the hell are you?

Now that we've seen Anita and David off, Fran and I sit on a bench on the grounds of the International Theosophical Society headquarters back in Chennai. Sun-spattered peace and cool shade lost in the hot chaos of this sprawling city! We find relief under enormous sheltering trees while bright green, red-beaked parakeets fly this way and that overhead, well worth the aggressive jerking in and out of traffic of the motor rickshaw that got us here. The grounds verge on being another botanical garden, with a giant banyan tree that vies for renown with a couple others I've seen claimed to be the largest in the world. The Society itself puts truth above belief and embraces all religions as holding some divine truth. I draw exception, however, with the idea that "the soul of man is immortal." I'm all for such a universal approach to the problems of human existence, but my problem with immortality is that as long as we hold out the vain hope that, no matter what we do we will survive ourselves, we will never come to value our lives for what they are: fragile, terminable, and as invaluable as we let them be. And this applies to all forms of life. Solid reality is the only foundation upon which to build paradise. We cannot build paradise out of vain hopes of immortality and otherworldly visions. Of course, great religions and systems of spirituality provide the means to build paradise on earth, as well. That is, Do unto others, Love thy neighbor, Accept, Envision, Be here now, etc. And the International Theosophical Society headquarters grounds seems to be a microcosm of paradise (where we sit

hours before we depart by train for the southernmost tip of India at Kanyakumari), with its international assortment of trees, its bright green parakeets, its spotless trash-free grounds. The spirit and the vision exist, just in isolated havens.

***An Image of God***

*in the grounds of the International*
*Theosophical Society Headquarters*

*A dark-faced version*
*of the Western image of God*
*just rode by on a bicycle*

*in light blue kurta*
*and orange lungi,*
*with long gray beard*
*and wet hair streaming.*

*Seated sideways behind him,*
*a small boy, swinging his legs*
*and pointing at the sights.*

# Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu

When we arrived in Kanyakumari, at the southernmost tip of the Indian subcontinent, with no hesitation we took a room at the Maadhini Hotel facing the Bay of Bengal, with a rustic view of the rooftops below, the swift low sea charging beyond, and not far out from the tip of the continent, to the south, two stone islands, each with its respective monument erected against the silver sky. On the nearer island stands the omnipresent statue of the Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar, who lived 2000 years ago, on a carapace of sea-smoothed granite—a monument that, at 133 feet, appears to have been pieced together with pre-sculpted blocks into the completed figure of the man. On the farthest island stands the Swami Vivekananda Memorial Temple, looking more gorgeous than any Raj residence I've seen so far—of fine red sandstone, with arched windows and masted cupolas. A beautiful stone causeway encircles the great elephantine hump of the island, buttressing the sea on the south side. Hindu reformer Vivekananda swam to these islands to meditate before he departed for the World Religions Conference in Chicago in 1893.

I have a mean thought: Some day we will have commemorated so many great people that the planet will be so crowded with statues, temples, shrines, memorials, and monuments that there won't be any room left to lead a common life.

After a short rest, because we still had our travel momentum and needed to move our limbs after riding the overnight train from Chennai, we stepped out to see the sights in Kanyakumari. We didn't bother attempting to enter the Hindu temple dedicated to Devi, but rather went around it to the tiny bathing beach at the very tip of India and tried not to stare too much as pilgrims disrobed to enter the water and bathe at the auspicious confluence of three seas. It's amazing how a woman can wring one end of her sari, then the other, while remaining fully entwined in it. Still other, older women had no qualms about letting breasts slip from robes. Young boys went completely naked. A short way farther around the point toward the Arabian Sea we found the monument where Gandhi's ashes were housed briefly till they were removed to various locations around India—but not before some of his ashes were sprinkled in the sea, here in Kanyakumari. All in all, despite the mediocre reviews given it in guidebooks, I'm glad we stayed the course to this beautiful and haunting outpost at the southern-most tip of India, even though—or, even more, because—we stayed here only one night.

It seems we have time to kill, back at our hotel, as it turns out the next bus to Kovalam, in nearby Kerala state, doesn't leave till two o'clock. I can think of worse ways to kill time than sitting in the lobby of the Maadhini Hotel looking out the window over the village rooftops at the two stone islands

beyond, dedicated to their respective icons, Thiruvallular and Vivekananda, or watching the little red and blue tub of a ferry chug back and forth every fifteen minutes or so. A compact, rust-red eagle, with a white head, balances eternally on the buffeting wind just outside the window, keeping an eye on rooftops below for unsuspecting prey. The wind here, at the confluence of three major seas, must never let up: the sea rushes relentlessly, frothingly, at the beach, the breaks, and the jetty, which, along with the eternal wind, gives Kanyakumari a haunted but pleasant feel. All night, as we slept last night, the wind howled around our balcony, the sound of which, in my dreams, I confused with the sound of the fan whirling over our bed. Fran's dreams of mosquitoes I confused with imaginary night itches. Dreams of back home seemed so real that, when I woke up, I thought I was only then beginning to dream—a dream of traveling in India. Strangely, our room was so clean, so comfortable and well-assigned, we were reluctant to go out on the town; we could see most of the best of it from our little balcony: charming pastel church facades and crosses standing up out of the broken, mottled roofs of the town. Wherever we went in India, popular music accosted or entertained our ears, depending on our mood. And our room at the Maadhini was no exception. Indian music wound through the halls into our room or rose up out of rooms above or below us, by way of open balcony doors—both television dance musicals and radio duets. Last night, after a dinner during which, for some reason, we couldn't stop giggling, Fran and I entertained ourselves in our room watching a replay of the 2000 Miss World Beauty Pageant—all part of our crazy mishmash of an adventure. I felt the Italian contestant should have won, though we both knew that the Indian beauty had already won a month or two earlier.

**January 30, 2001.** As it turns out, because we had a whole three hours to kill waiting to catch the bus to Kovalam, we decided after all to take the little tub of a ferry over to the Shree Vivekananda Memorial on the farther of the two stone-humped islands. This, of course, brought us closer to the omnipresent statue on the other, closer island, which someone told me was reserved as an ashram facility, still under construction. There are two mandapams (a mandapam is a pillared outdoor hall or pavilion for public rituals) on the farther island. The first, which we entered barefoot, of course, had enshrined within it, behind thick glass, a supposed footprint of Devi in bas-relief, adorned with tiny flowers for toenails. The other, much taller building, which I described earlier, houses a large metallic statue of Vivekananda and two smaller photo shrines, one of his guru and the other of his "consort." All very ornate, the embellishments were still in the process of being chiseled to completion. The most memorable experience for us was to go into a specially designed "AUM" meditation room below and toward the back of the structure. We entered and sat for a few minutes focusing on the brilliantly illuminated metallic Sanskrit OM on the forward wall, then escaped as a family entered with a babbling toddler. The worst moment, which I learned about in retrospect, took place as we were leaving the Shree Vivekananda Mandapam. Several Indian guys addressed Fran in an impertinent manner, then, as if bidden to do so, came forward excitedly, en masse, asking if they could take pictures with her. This we were quite able to ignore as we headed below to enter the meditation cell; but later, on the return boat, I noticed four ever-more-forlorn-looking young Japanese women and noted them to Fran. Fran had seen that the same obnoxious group of lads had been harassing them as they were

trying to write in their journals outside the mandipam. Four innocent young gals from Japan simply don't have a chance against a dozen swarthy, sharp-tongued, busy-fingered, camera-toting South Indian guys. No contest. The women were clearly having a bad time. Their culture simply has not provided them with the means to fight back, let alone grow philosophical or humorous about, such obtrusiveness, as I'm afraid Fran and I have, through experience if nothing else, provided ourselves.

On the boat ride over, we sat down in what for a moment seemed like a women's section of the seating but what turned out to be filled with members from a women's conference in Madurai. With laughter, several of them indicated to us that they wanted Fran and I to switch places so she could sit next to them and, I suspect, to separate me from them, being a man. But they were having so much fun that they indicated I should slide down away from them and closer to the young Indian man—the only other male in our section—at which they exclaimed, "See, white and black!" They meant we were a pair in that we were opposite colors. Taking up the game, I quickly looked about me for something white—the zipper on Fran's bag, as it turned out—and held it against my skin, exclaiming, "No, *this* is white! *I'm* pink!" They all laughed uproariously. If I'd been quicker, I'd have held something black against my brown neighbor's skin. Sometimes there's good fun to be had in breaking through barriers.

# Kovalam, Kerala

Yet another ugly day in Paradise! Yesterday, having gotten on our local bus in Kanyakumari and ridden the three ass-aching hours via Trivandrum to Kerala, we now lie on the beach in Kovalam—a true tourist beach, with all the trappings: corpulent corpuses (nigh on to corpses), strewn along the sea's edge or bobbing negligibly in the halcyon surf. We're accosted on beach and in restaurant by fruit and fruit-drink vendors, longyi (the long wide cloth people in Asia wrap around the lower half of the body) and sheet saleswomen (a stack on each head), cigarette boys, a sunglass monger with pairs hanging all the way around his waist and from every shirt flap, who calls out in a gay voice, "Sunnglaaaasssessss! Sunnglaaaasssessss!" And of course there are the mat and umbrella rental folks. There are lots of French escapees, German indulgers, Japanese wannabes, and a smattering of beach devotees from England and Australia. Oh, and yes, Americans—as Indians know us. The worst for the self-conscious female or the seclusive couple are the very irritating Indian gawkers, usually young, always rude, checking out breasts in bikini tops or keeping an eye on couples playing in the surf, in case they kiss—or worse (meaning better). This really got on Fran's nerves last evening after we

arrived (yesterday), when we decided to squeeze in a swim and a walk before turning in. Several guys watched us from shore, staring unabashedly as we sometimes held each other, albeit playfully, in the water. Or as guys walked by along the surf, their eyes followed Fran's face or breasts. These guys aren't locals; they're young guys from other cities and states who have checked into the beach scene to check out the girls or couples who express affection in public, which they're likely to do in such a romantic tropical setting. The locals, in contrast, appear jaded, just trying to serve potential customers and survive the low season. Today was better: Either we weren't bothered so much or we didn't notice. Still, we came here knowing that we were going to experience tourist paradise, and that's just what it is: clean hotels, restaurants, and shops facing the beach, with lots of action and perfect swimming and frolicking in the cove's waters.

For a moment I escape my standard little reality, as I bounce lightly on my toes, beyond the crashing waves of Kerala's Kovalam Beach. I pull my tinted swimming goggles up on my forehead. The sea, as the sun begins to fall toward the horizon, looks like mercury rolling and sloshing all around me. The clouds beyond are a troubling yet somehow benign gas rising from the sea. The rocks to north and south are great elephantine creatures sinking slowly back into earth. And what creature am I who, totally alone for a moment, exist free of all previous connections, memories, and language, who has found himself bobbing lightly on an alien planet? For a moment I am no one. I might have fallen out of the sky, just escaped savages, or been born from an egg—and into a world of colors for which there are no names, where mercury sloshes harmlessly against

my body, silvery and oily, where what might be poisonous gases above the horizon keep their distance, nevertheless. I might as well sink back into this planet to reemerge on yet another planet in a billion years. I turn to face the beach—the tourists, the locals, Fran reading on the beach—my whole present as I sustain it, the winding route of my past, the as-yet-unknown byways of my future, my life, as I balance it in the main.

**February 1, 2001.** We had looked into locating a classical instrumental performance in the vast and cultured city of Chennai—had looked in the newspaper there, sought the assistance of the hotel owner-manager, Mr. Prasad—and came up with inconveniently scheduled or awkwardly located popular vocal programs only. But here, in the tiny out-of-the-way beach resort town of Kovalam, in the state of Kerala, as we were about to head back behind the beach to a restaurant where we heard some recorded music we liked, we learned there would be a performance of classical sitar right upstairs on the roof of our hotel, the Sea Flower Guest Home. And now we sit at a little table, having eaten some delicious Indian dishes, listening to the second raga composition, played by a musician who is also a music director in the film industry. I whispered to Fran, "This is one of the most wonderful nights of my life—tantalizing food, transcendent music, and gorgeous company!" I was struck that the first raga slowly erected beautifully sculpted mountains upon expansive plains of India, how it engaged the appreciative soul and gave the listener a place to reside in the music, rather than, as with a lot of classical Western music, intruding a statement, a melody, for the memory or for the body to move. This is one of those experiences by which I am further inspired to discipline myself in my own arts, including improvising with

my violin on classical scales and meters of ancient India, which for me have a universal quality and staying power.

The sun set in a sea of blue cloud lying on a platter of silver water. Slowly darkness gathered under the palms, and the sitarist, the tabla player, and the tampura player built landscapes for the ear's enlightenment and the forgotten soul's deep memories. History smiled upon us as we sat quietly in that rooftop restaurant, listening, and listening only. I thought: Redeem the music, cultivate the food, repair the architecture, the ruins, of India and throw out the corruption, the caste system (by the roots), and dowries—immediately. No wonder so many spiritual tracts in bookstores appeal to the struggling, the oppressed, and the morally damaged aspirant to God and enlightenment in India. But then, I reminded myself that a lot of great music and beautiful art grow out of the fertile soil of pain.

The power and stillness required to play a single note on the violin I may have to undergo all manner of contortions and agonies to achieve. I too must build my musical self up like a mountain upon a plain.

# The Train to Mumbai (Bombay), Maharashtra

**February 5, 2001.** After having snoozed and kept to ourselves up in our upper berths during the first morning of our two-day marathon rail journey, we finally clambered down to meet the two fellows sharing our compartment. M. Mathews and Jayachandrum Unnithan (Victory of the Moon Innocence might be a good literal translation of his name) are in general insurance marketing, on their way from Kollam to Mumbai for a training program. Mathews, a devout Orthodox Christian, was very gentle, well-spoken, and engaging, while Unnithan, a Hindu and nephew of the great art film director Adoor Gopalkrishnan, was more limited in his English ability, but no less pleasant. The four of us spoke for hours, till late dinner arrived, on all manner of subjects, from education to taxation to food and yoga (of course), as if we were all full and empty at once, like empty glasses of culture and experience pouring all our best knowledge and opinions into one another with great satisfying pleasure. They were intent on assuring themselves that we thought their state of Kerala was wonderful. Of course, we had only visited the very skewed

image of Kovalam, but as I assured them as we parted two days later, if they were representative of their state, then indeed Kerala is a wonderful place!

# Mumbai (Bombay), Maharashtra

Unfortunately, we pulled into one of Mumbai's three train stations at about 5:15 in the morning, a very awkward time either to eat breakfast or to secure a hotel room. Nevertheless, outside the station we found a white-whiskered, red-eyed taxi driver who spoke good English to take us to the Salvation Army Guest House, which, as it turned out, was all closed up and not responding to my knocks in the dark of the morning. So we had him take us to the Hotel Maria, which we were able to enter because on each floor a man slept just inside accordion-barred doors. Our silent, half-asleep man showed us a room, giving us a card that said checkout was by noon, but wouldn't let us fill out the registration book nor give me a receipt for the 600 rupees that he insisted I give him before he let us shut the door. This transaction lead to trouble later when, at noon, another man came to collect another 600 rupees, indicating somehow that we had checked in so early (about 6 am) that it counted as the previous day's charge. We got real hot about this matter; I had a major argument, first with man No. 2, on our floor, then with a man No. 3, apparently a higher-up in the pecking order, in both

cases with man No. 1 standing by, who, as I pointed out, had failed to make clear that checkout was for the same day. They had to relent under the logic of my argument, but we also had to concede to checking out 24 hours after check-in. India can be a real hassle! Some moments are gems, some taste of hell (becoming gems in retrospect).

So after watching as much Indian cable television as we could possibly squeeze in or endure in our hard-fought-for 24-hour hotel room, a seedy room, really, with a couple of unused and one used rubber on or under the bed, we slipped out of that damned warren by 5:45 the next morning to watch the sun rise, in all its carbon-dioxide-tinted glory, above the otherwise lovely boat-dotted, island-backed harbor, talking before long with a woman named Lisa, who found us out under the streetlights. She tagged along with us, waiting for a restaurant to open, then through breakfast, and then to the Salvation Army Guest House, where we had arranged for a room the day before, gabbing brainlessly and trying to get us involved in her decisions and in looking for a hotel room for her—an American from the East Coast, whom I found tedious, if not irritating. She sloughed off when it became apparent that she couldn't score a room at our hotel and after she may have sensed our (or my) relative disinterest. I'm such a snooty meanie, but I'd rather look around and experience my own responses to the world than listen to someone who isn't paying attention to the world at all. Not exactly a spiritual attitude, but a human one.

And now, after a 46-hour train journey from Trivandrum and much getting about Mumbai once we arrived, and our horrible

stay at Hotel Maria, we are abruptly (from the standpoint of this journal) lying on our bed in the "Red Shield" Salvation Army Guest House in the Colaba district of this big magnificent colonial city!

Once Fran and I got ourselves established in our room at the Salvation, we went to Victoria Terminus, intending to make all our remaining train reservations in India. I had suspected that we really needed to go to Churchgate Station to do what we needed to do, but we heard that we could take care of our business at either station, due to improved computer links. And Fran thought we should see the famous architecture of Victoria Terminal in the daylight and get some pictures. The buildings in Mumbai, though rusty, dusty, scummy, and mottled, are huge, reminiscent of Europe: Gothic British, of the times of the Maharajas. And Victoria Terminal had domes and huge gargoyles jumping out into the sky as if to meet evil head on in the ether of the unknown, well in advance of evil's penetration into the Empire. Anyway, as I thought, we would indeed have to move over to Churchgate to tend to our seven reservations, and, after what might be rated between a medium and major ordeal, we accomplished our task: Mumbai to Jaipur to Agra to Delhi (short stopover) to Pathankot (ultimately to Dharamsala) to Saharanpur (ultimately to Rishikesh) and from Haridwar to Varanasi, and finally back to Kolkata, where we depart by plane to Bangkok and Seattle. All remaining tickets and reservations in hand! We still have a lot of time to ride the trains around India—an experience we're not soon to forget!

***The Conservancy Workers***

*on a photo display*
*during an arts festival*
*in Mumbai*

*The Conservancy Workers,*
*the Thirty-Thousand mute,*
*covered in slime and*
*putrefaction of Mumbai,*
*sweep and dig, dive into*
*and destroy the evidence*
*of daily negligence,*
*refuse of smiles,*
*of our deals and roughly*
*civilized animal hungers.*

*They consume everything*
*the rest of the city doesn't:*
*the arrows of broken glass,*
*the slings of rotting flesh,*
*the mountainous hatred*
*that rolls down long silk tie*
*and gold-embroidered sari.*

*They stink to nether hell,*
*their nostrils and pores*
*spread fiercely open. Like*
*the lowly earth far below*
*they cannot turn away.*

**February 6, 2001.** The highlight so far today, the day we arrived in Mumbai, was our visit to Jehangir Art Gallery. There

were four exhibits, each featuring a different artist. The one in the main gallery was innocuous; I can't remember but one or two paintings there. The second, as we moved through the adjoining spaces, was squarely abstract and commercial, while the third was organically, and much more beautifully, abstract—impressions or sensations of nature involving watercolors and torn or rubbed paper. But the fourth and final showing knocked my socks off. The artist, Naozar Darwalla, superimposed rudimentary, broadly stroked portraits in black, along with other sensual, tense, or melding strokes, all in photos and other realistic found pictures to create studies of lives of individuals otherwise impenetrable to the passing eyes of daily life. Some were subtler than others, some compartmentalized, some melded to the point of unifying various depths of perception and meaning. The artist, when we approached to thank him, showed us one painting that combines, hidden in its workings, a golden Buddha, all in the context of a woman's face. Afterward, we spoke with Naozar at length about his work, his educational involvements and business attempts, then exchanged email and website addresses. I ended by telling him I loved his Nehru-collared blue denim shirt and told him, jokingly, that I wanted it. We've been looking for one ever since. I swear that if they'd accepted credit cards at the gallery I would have bought one of his paintings—already framed. Thankfully, they did not accept credit cards and I could not take such a large framed picture, as we would have had to carry it all over India and forever protect it from pending damage.

Our timing in arriving in Mumbai during the first week of February was good up to a point in that the Kala Ghoda Festival 2001 runs from the 1st to the 14th. Unfortunately, however, Fran was able to locate only one event that fit our schedule here,

titled "Dance and Music of Fisherfolk." We had little trouble locating the nearby David Sassoon Library Garden, where the organizers had set up a quaint outdoor "hangout" cafe, and many children, as it turned out, were gathered to practice and ultimately—after an hour and a half—perform a Koli dance, all ministered by a dance performer and instructor. Not at all a fine costumed, true folk dance, but endearing nevertheless to watch all those kids either readily or not so readily learn a rather complex routine with staffs and baskets as props and the same music starting over and over again. Kids lolled about on the steps up to the stage or ran crying to "mommie." Meanwhile, first our café umbrella, then many others' umbrellas slowly fell over onto the viewers and drinkers of coffee and tea from demitasse cups, as the poles had barely penetrated the soil to stand rigid against the breeze. Fran had somehow overlooked that the event was a workshop for kids. Still, it was a pleasant evening, and we went with it.

Later today we took a taxi to the so-called "Hanging Gardens," atop Malabar Hill—where the rich folk live, apparently. The garden was designed and planted in the 19th century and did not have much about it, except a few arbors, that suggested "hanging." The effect was a closely cropped, not at all lush, mesa of a garden, but with the redeeming quality that it included quite a few jovial topiary animals. We were writing away in our journals, sitting on one of the many benches, when an elderly fellow sat nearby and began talking to us, a Dr. N. N. Pundey, retired educator and principle at a university, as best as I could gather. Although, as he admitted in his apparent excitement, we were his first Americans, he was a delightful speaker and very informative. In fact, I think at

times he began to lapse into lecture, he so enjoyed speaking and sharing knowledge. And it turns out he writes poetry, has published some poems, especially about his wife, who had died two or three years previously. He had had a brain hemorrhage, himself, some twelve years before and a single bypass in 1995, all of which he told us with such a matter-of-fact demeanor that we were disarmed. Also, he wanted so much to share the juicy guava he was munching on, but we told him we don't much care for the seeds. He told us it was good for his constipation. All this from a doctor-professor such that perhaps we were relieved when a very dark, as it turns out Mauritian, Elvis-looking fellow came up to talk to us and was soon followed by his whole family, all from Mauritius. We were surrounded by delightful strangers, all of whom wanted to tell us their story or about their country. A walk and journal-writing session in the Hanging Gardens of Mumbai turned into a major social event, as so often happens to us wherever we go. Our address books are filling up fast, our global network growing dense and wide! The N. N. in Dr. Pundey's name, by the way, is Nagendranath, or King of Snakes! He wants to send us a translation of his book of poems dedicated to his wife. I may, if necessary, offer to help him with a translation.

Once we'd managed to take care of our errands, we dropped into one of the many drinking holes we'd spotted near the Regal Cinema. Beer, peanuts, rock and roll, even a bit of pub atmosphere—so we pulled out the cribbage set, played a game while drinking the first beer, and were in the middle of our second game and a second beer when our waiter came over to inform us in his stumbling English that we couldn't play these cards in this establishment. We were livid. I said over and over

that it was a stupid rule, and Fran said there's no way we're leaving a tip. I finally started laughing; it was all so ludicrous. We went nearly skipping, arms around each other, through the sidewalk emporium cracking jokes and making strange sounds and faces at touts till we burst into the cleaners to collect our laundry (our socks were long, flat, and hard), full of mad humor and act-outs. The scales of Vishnu and Shiva tip, then balance again. Now we lie once again on our bed in the Salvation, reading and writing, feeling the fan's breeze brush our legs.

I can smell the "sin" in India; the pious stand out all the more. Dog-eat-dog humbles some old men to goodness. We've met several people who recognize the well-lit path of the guru amidst the craven shadows of backstabbers and swindlers. Still, the word "enlightenment" never escapes their mouths. Life in service of life: the wife, the son, the open-faced stranger from another land become the path, as far as the now feeble body, the waning energy, can travel. Yet, in a land of a billion, we meet one, at least one enlightened human being, once a day—a small but lingering example of wrinkled and sedentary beauty.

Mumbai, I want to sing of your weight and light before I'm ready, to feel as if I've been to your heart and back, to this negligible notebook within the arched walls of this room. Yet I fail to remember I exist, at all times, in the very heart of the world, wherever I stop and simply feel. Your shadows have engulfed your pavements as the horns of a water buffalo curl back to pierce its neck. Your Victorian buildings mock the most violent earthquake, so like mountains do they stand. Yet these meager renderings, these broad strokes, miss the history,

the lives of these buildings—all the blood spilled to take the city back, in its present form, from the Empire. I feel your song rumbling like a spring unsprung, like water untouched by light. I look up and see the fan turning, follow with my eyes the wires leading out of the room through the wall, and I can go no farther; I know no more beyond these walls. Yet I lie in the heart of my own small Mumbai, quivering a little, trickling a little black ink; I snort with humor a little Mumbai air at my nevertheless comforting inadequacy. My song is an infinitesimal whistling in a nostril amidst the great expanse of pain and shadow that is Mumbai.

## February 7, 2001

### *A Spiritual Room*

*after reading Baudelaire's* Paris Spleen

*A spiritual room is a blue room,*
*in which the aspirant is suspended in space,*
*without bearings, with nothing but thoughts*
*of emptiness to console him.*

*A spiritual room is an orange room,*
*in which one is consumed by fire*
*and the sky through the window*
*is an unattainable cool sapphire.*

*A spiritual room is a green room,*
*in which one is lost in a swaying jungle,*
*in which one can't help but sweat out*
*all his poor forgotten violent dreams.*

*A spiritual room is a purple room,*
*in which the inevitably religious man*
*must drown in blood and love*
*while reaching a high place here on earth.*

*A spiritual room is a white room,*
*where the minor saint moves about in pious robes*
*and touches his fingertips to his forehead*
*as if to others' foreheads and dreams of growing wings.*

*A spiritual room is a black room,*
*which is eternally the beginning of all colors and rooms,*
*in which the brave soul must seek for every hint of light*
*and survive his own bars and fangs.*

After checking out of—and storing our bags at—the Salvation Army Guest House, we went for coffee and freshly blended fruit drinks at the Modern Juice Bar, went on a photo spree, at the famous Taj Mahal Hotel (kitty corner from the Salvation), dickered for a couple of agate balls I intend to use as tai chi handballs back in the States, then caught a taxi to Mani Bhavan, Gandhi's once-upon-time residence in Mumbai, now a museum and photo gallery. We looked at and/or read every item on each of the three floors of the mansion, taking notes in Fran's case, and photos, especially of the busts and great long quotes, in my case. When we came to the glassed off room in which this truly great man worked, slept, and meditated, I nearly wept. My eyes filled abruptly with tears, then, as I turned into a hall to look at a photo, I was swept with shame at the little I do with my life when I know there's so much to do, at how much time I spend training myself and gathering information when what I need to do, as the saying goes, is "Just do it!" But the

problem is foggier in America—not specific problems, just the one big one, which might be described as fear, distrust, hatred, clinging, protectionism, blind conservatism, environmental and cultural destruction, opulent ignorance, apathy, and media manipulation. One big problem, really, that breaks down into so many lesser but easier to recognize and deal with problems. And I do know what role I want to play and by what means I want to change my bit of world. At least I have that much! Still, though it's important to know who Gandhi was, the concern with truth and action (or passive resistance) are what really counts, what he demonstrated that matters. And I believe there can be action in words, and words are my means.

# Off to Rajasthan

We're now at Mumbai Central Train Station, the third huge station we've experienced in this city and by far the most impressive I've seen in India! A monster—clean, efficient, with a pleasant, unthreatening atmosphere. The coolies wear red bellboy uniforms out front and are not bothersome: I said a word and they moved away from the trunk of our taxi as we unloaded. Inside, the floor looked like a big picnic ground, strewn with relaxing, lounging clusters, heaps, and families of bodies. Everything the train traveler might need is available in authorized, organized, out-of-the-way shops. The schedule board tells which trains leave from which platforms, that is, exactly where to board, and there's a big screen high up on the far end where entertainment and train schedule information is shown. I just had to get some photos, so Fran and I found our way up to the balcony and, ultimately, to the waiting room designated for our ticketing class, where we now wait out our time till we board our train for Jaipur.

**February 8, 2001.** Every day is an arrival, and mine, this morning, as the train proceeds through the rising sun, is one of relaxing some one big invisible muscle. This morning I wake

to window-shaped orange splashes of light blinking on the compartment wall and privacy curtain, to feeling perfectly at home on a train that has just passed through both an oblivious night and the earthquake-rocked state of Gujarat. And somehow, I'm happy to lie, happy to sit with Indian men on business trips; I am happy to stare out the window at the dust-covered chaparral. And I am as happy to perceive the miniature villages, between pairs of railroad tracks, the makeshift plastic tents of gypsies, beggars, day workers, and coolies. Proximity can be no reason to be emotionally devastated! The swallows still swoop, the crows still heckle, the pigeons still coo. The cypress, the acacia, and the sage still soak up light and carbon dioxide, much as the eyes hope to see. In a single snapshot of the retina, I capture a thoughtless plastic bag stuck to a shrub and, beyond, a lovely pastoral herder and his sheep making the rounds of edible grass, his arms hooked over a stick across his shoulders. As always and forever—or not! The stars still shine beyond the sun and glare, and I am warm and painless, bumping along, across from my wife, who also writes, on the train from Mumbai to Jaipur, having arrived, and still arriving.

Finally, camels! There's a train of camels being saddled. A camel is pulling a heavily laden cart. There's another. It's as if we've entered an altogether different country. Ah, the many shades, the many variations on the theme of life. Total fascination? Ultimate monotony? After wonder, what? Truth, beauty, and action keep this man busy!

In this simple, sublimated act of shuffling cards, the American reveals himself, as three Indian men sitting across from him on the train watch him cut, bend, shuffle, square; cut, bend, shuffle, square; then cut and deal to his wife and himself

six cards each, and they begin to play.... *Shuffle,* he thinks, like no other man in all of India, like an American who grew up playing cards—fish, rummy, hearts, spades, pinochle, poker, cribbage—who grew up—who took pride in his skill at—shuffling and playing cards. And he's perfected his particular fluid, rhythmic style of shuffling cards. The Indian men stop talking to watch, to wonder—perhaps without pursuing any further thoughts on the matter—where that shuffling came from: How does this fine, fast, machine-like shuffling say who this man is and where he's from?

# Jaipur, Rajasthan

**February 10, 2001.** Fran is having a hard time with Jaipur. And I have to admit, it's more crowded, more frenetic, more in our face, and dirtier than any other city we've been to in India so far. We came back from a walk to—and a bicycle rickshaw ride back from—the market just inside the Pink Fort walls and our feet, ankles, and calves were filthy. I washed them more carefully than usual and the towel came away dirty. So we've returned to wearing our shoes, rather than just sandals, when we go out. But we came prepared for the touts and rickshaw wallahs, thanks to warnings in our *Let's Go* guidebook. I figured out that our chosen hotel was only 600 meters from the train station, so we simply strode or pushed past the onslaught of drivers and found the Guest House, the Atithi, with only minor confusion. But, wow, were we hit hard with hard sell, just as the book described! There are too many hungry drivers and too few—but apparently enough—real tourist suckers doing the so-called "Golden Triangle" package: Delhi, Agra, and Jaipur. Desperation becomes ferociousness. Pride grows claws. And there's degradation in numbers....

I, on the other hand, seem not to be bothered too much by Jaipur. As I wrote to our friends Barb and Denise back in the

States, "In my birthday-Buddha state of mind, it all sheds off me as Northwest rain sheds off a good REI parka." The dirt is just dust: It washes off. The touts' calls of "Hello!" and "Just look!" and "What country from?" and "Cheap price!" are like different kinds of beeps and honks of traffic: I don't notice them after awhile. And the crowds, narrow passages, close calls with wheels, and congestion? There's always a restaurant, shop, or our hotel into which to escape. Even climbing into and sitting back in an auto rickshaw I find salvation; I become part of the flow, not resistant, not fighting, not critical, but waving, as I did yesterday—like a movie star or politician—back at other passengers in other auto rickshaws who in turn wave, and we smile.

The Atithi Guest House, where we now write up on the rooftop terrace waiting to check out and depart for Pushkar, though not the stateliest, most regal, nor fanciest of hotels, is indeed the best hotel we've stayed at (with the exception of Patricia's residence in Pondicherry, which didn't have hot water showers or hot taps). Family-run, it's clean, efficient, professional, and relaxing—with all the amenities (depending on the room): fresh linen and towels daily, soap and toilet paper. Everything works, including the hot water showers and tap (really hot). And they keep a tab for the room, meals, laundry, and room service from the minute we arrive. This hotel has made a real difference, especially for Fran, who needs an escape from the maddening city of Jaipur. There's absolutely nothing of interest to look at or watch from the windows or terrace, but the flowering plants that line the terrace make up for a lot. It's a haven at 500 rupees (nine dollars).

The City Palace, which once housed the royal family of Jaipur, got my interest, whereas the rest of the city did not. Unfortunately, its spaces have been occupied by the million denizens, as elsewhere in India, but it's not hard to see how the Maharaja of nearly three centuries ago planned and executed a structural paradise, most evident in the area of the present Maharaja's residence and museum spaces. Yet even some of these spaces, structures, surfaces, and embellishments are eroding, becoming discolored, crumbling. The famous, and certainly gorgeous, Palace of the Winds doesn't look as brightly or consistently colored as on the cover of our *India by Rail* guidebook. The Maharaja's residence is beginning to look a bit shabby toward the upper reaches. And the highly ornamented gates in the forecourt have long since lost their vividness and luster. Still, within these "museum" grounds there is retained some peace and quiet from the chaotic and gritty streets without. So I was inclined to linger as long as possible within this once majestic realm, finally winding up in a full dawdle in a music shop listening to disk after disk trying to get an idea what music we might want to buy before we leave India. But Fran was hungry....

One museum space displayed items from the wardrobes of various maharajas; one was filled with arms and weapons, mostly daggers and pistols; yet another was replete with manuscripts, monstrous carpets, and, my favorite, an intriguing and fascinating assortment of miniature Mughal paintings. Then there were a few gardens just outside the present royal family's residences, and a few rooms inside, that we viewers were allowed to enter. All in all, a worthwhile visit, justifying our coming to Jaipur, at least for me. We didn't get up to the

so-called Tiger Fort (built in 1734 for defense and as a retreat by the founder of Jaipur, Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II), but we hope to when we return to Jaipur to pick up our rings and bracelets, in which we're having set some moonstones we found on Protection Point on the Washington coast. Perhaps we'll even traipse up the barren hump of rock and dirt to see it up close, as well as the valley and the hive of the city below.

In the mess and mottle, the noise and madness and desperation that is Jaipur, there is this one small isolated beauty: One sweet unruffled dove courting another upon the weather-scoured wall opposite our Athiti Guest House. She flies off to a leafy tree and he after her, leaving my imagination with this final message from the one reality that underlies all others: Nature persists beneath the rough "structures" of so-called "civilization."

# Journey to Pushkar, Rajasthan

Having to wait several hours at the Jaipur station for the train to Ajmer (and ultimately Pushkar), we witnessed, all of a sudden amidst the crowds, a woman in a sari angrily chasing and whacking with a stick some poor kid who had been collecting plastic mineral water bottles. The boy was stumbling backwards to get away, trying to protect himself with an arm from the thrashing stick, but the woman was astonishingly violent and surprisingly effective with what looked to be a military policeman's baton. The crowd, including us, maintained a shifting circle around the incident, depending on which direction the woman whacked and which way the boy retreated or fell. Nobody tried to intervene, nobody questioned the woman, and nobody stepped in to appease the woman or soothe the boy. The incident was a complete mystery to us. Fran speculated that the woman was an undercover station cop; I thought she might have abruptly borrowed the stick from a policeman in her anger. Who knows what the boy did? He looked like a good kid to me.

Thirty minutes later or so, at the other end of the platform, we witnessed a man with old-fashioned English military-style muttonchops grab a small boy—who appeared to be selling or collecting something in a can—by the throat, threatening to choke him to death. Fran said she saw the man strike the kid before I turned to look. Was it the heat? Was there something about Jaipur that accounted for all this violence?

And the difficult events weren't over yet. Once we figured out that our train wouldn't be leaving for another three hours and were hauling ourselves and our bags over to what we learned was the right platform, I spotted—or rather heard, then spotted—a kid, apparently with cerebral palsy, crying loudly and drooling mucous all over himself or herself—I'll say *her*—where she'd been stationed in a dirty heap against a wall. The sight—the sound—was heartrending. I couldn't take it. Once we got our bags established on a bench, and despite our policy not to give to beggars, I marched over to a tea and biscuit vender, bought a couple Indian breadsticks, and set them on the canvas-covered lap of the wailing cerebral palsy—possible begging-racket—victim. She didn't seem to notice amidst all the agony and blear—clearly emotional as much as physical, I was certain. So I said, "Now you eat these, okay?" and returned to Fran and our bench.

Then I remembered I'd forgotten, in my consternation, to pay for the breadsticks and, as I turned back toward the vender, I saw a dog near the kid. When I got there, the bread was gone and the kid was still wailing loudly. Apparently the dog, or some other hungry thief, had stolen the breadsticks before the girl could pick them up. So I bought another, as she had quit crying and seemed to be smiling at me—hopefully now, I thought. This time I made sure she took the food in

her hand. She put it in her mouth so she could remove the newspaper, then managed to bite off a small piece and begin chewing in a tortuous manner. It was almost too much for me. Sometimes the world is too wicked in its heartlessness. As I returned to Fran, I passed others—commuters I hadn't noticed till now—who had been watching. Could I detect concern, shame, remorse, a new determination, a lesson in their eyes, in their mouths and bodies, as they sat there, motionless, on their benches? Later, in the station waiting room, I just read by chance the short piece in Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen* entitled "Cake," in which two beggar kids fight tooth and nail over a piece of bread till it disintegrates and neither gets any.

# Pushkar, Rajasthan

**February 11, 2001.** Today was our first full day in Pushkar. Pushkar takes the prize so far for towns and cities in Asia! It even outdoes Kathmandu—it's utterly charming, with stone temples and pagodas sprung up like mushrooms around the sacred Brahma lake held in the arms of the town, low mountains on all sides, and narrow, winding, shop-lined lanes. Colors—splotches, patches, swatches, stitches of every purple to red to orange to pink to greens and blues, pastels and earth tones—the expression kaleidoscope hardly suffices. The restaurants are fun to explore and, wow!—There are foreigners from every corner of the planet!—Pablo from Argentina this morning, an Indian-American hanging out with two British guys, Israelis abounding—but Muslims are non-existent in this Hindu spiritual center.

It's been quite a day. We weren't at all enamored with the Oasis Hotel. Noisy with traffic and late night and early morning business and chatter, dusty with patches of desert out front and dust blown up into the hotel by traffic roaring by. Waiting for breakfast ate up about an hour and a half of our morning. And we had to walk too far to reach the pleasant activity of town, so we moved to the Rainbow Hotel, which fits all the criteria

that the Oasis didn't and for half the price: 150 rupees (three dollars) a night.

From the Rainbow Hotel in Pushkar, we set out on the town, but didn't get too far, for we were immediately captured by a covey of Rajasthani desert gypsy women, perched on tiny goatskin-covered wicker stools, at a tea stall at the bottom of our lane. They swept us up like lovers of romance, like sweethearts from America, like seasoned travelers who, by their very seasonedness, are caught off guard by a little culture shock in their own country. The desert folk of Rajasthani are fierce-looking close-to-earth people, more comfortable sitting on the ground than on a chair. The men wear sprawling, rough-wound turbans and long sweeping mustaches—lean, tough-looking, and wise. The women stay even closer to earth, though they dress more colorfully, with silver bangles hanging from nose to ear and around to the back of the head. Beautiful!—and impossible to resist! Fran's hands were covered with henna patterns in a matter of minutes and soon we were paying an unnegotiated 100 rupees for the work, a supposed gift to the artists. Not, as we learned later, that the work was superlative, by any means, but I got many good photos of Fran getting worked on (or over) and of these lovely desert gypsy women. Suffice it to say that I sat silently, happily, for long periods watching the interaction. Fran is a sister wherever she goes, a joy to watch, and I was returned, in those sunny morning moments, to that pure state of wonder I've experienced as a newcomer to an exotic world.

So we finally got away from the Sirens of Henna and wandered the length of the main shopping street half-heartedly throwing out prices at Rajasthani crocheted carpets and unsuccessfully seeking out the yoga ashram Jill at the Salvation

in Mumbai told us about. We had lunch, met a Swedish woman named Anna and a Swiss woman named Claudia, then pieced together enough clues to actually find the legendary Swami-ji's place. Of course Swami-ji was not about. As his sister put it, "He is in Gujurat and won't be back for about three days. Sounds as if there are yoga sessions anyway. So I will walk over with Fran tomorrow morning, then continue on myself toward one of Brahma's wives' temples up on what looks like a big cinder cone.

**February 12, 2001.** Pushkar may be touristy, full of New Age travelers and expats, but deep beneath the layers of commerce, hanging-out, and travel-talk, there's a magnificent spiritual energy—pure, contagious, eons old. So, after seeing Fran to Swami-ji's ashram this morning (where, I repeat, he himself was not present), I entered an apparently uninhabited, unused lakeside ghat (steps leading down into holy waters) a few doors down, where I sat a spell and soaked up the morning ambiance. As the sun inched its way up over a ridge, monkeys sat on a wall overlooking the lake, in coronas of white light, as the sun struck their fur. The lake lay smooth as a mirror except where birds and fish struck the surface and circles rippled outward. Chant poured from speakers over the lake. Several ghats were in full swing with pilgrims, bathers, and sadhus splashing, dunking, and slapping wet clothes on rocks. The lake, I notice, is completely encased in ghat stairs that continue down into and under the water. Mornings on the lake, on Brahma's lake, have entranced me more than mornings in Katmandu, more than any place I've ever traveled to, except perhaps villages in the Nepali Himalayas—and Varanasi, twenty-one years before.

Once I'd found Fran at the yoga ashram, we wandered through a gate into an out-of-the-way garden cafe. There we met Raju—little Raju with the suave way, who, as soon as he'd taken our order for coffee and tea, invited a pair of Rajasthani desert gypsy musicians, playing outside the gate on the road, into the cafe garden to join us. Next I knew, we had these very charming musicians, husband and wife, sitting cross-legged on the hard earth, performing a folk song about—and as if sung by—a brother and sister. Meanwhile, Raju was seeing to our needs, mainly trying to get us interested in buying some hashish, when out of nowhere appeared a very strange, hollowed out, scary-looking fellow who joined us at our table. His long hair, outdated dress, and laconic manner suggested an anachronism harking back to Rolling Stones days, as if he had had a moment of rock and roll enlightenment on LSD one time and, via the experience, had transcended his own tight-bound culture into the mad state of cultural relativity, an experience which has long since become a legend in his own mind and, in turn, left him stranded back in the sixties—or so I imagined as I discretely studied him. As he put it when I asked him where he was from, he didn't "come from" anywhere. There isn't any "come from." There's just "here." He also pointed out for our enlightenment that "no where" can be spelled "now here." We got up to go just about then, having given the husband and wife musicians 100 rupees for a wonderful musical experience, during which I played the husband's folk violin and Fran took lots of photos, when the couple hit me up for Coca Colas on top of that, as they knew they could suck a music sucker like me for a few more rupees. Irresistible people! But now

we'd done the henna and desert gypsy music thing and the garden cafe drug scene, and the desert gypsies and local druggies aren't the only folks in Pushkar.

Fran's really been in a bit of a swirl. She too admits she's been struck by a lot of unexpected culture shock. I mention this because we've had several discussions about how, because we're fairly seasoned travels, not only are we not experiencing the overwhelming culture shock that we experienced when we were younger, but we're also not experiencing the wonder and awe that we experienced when we first traveled abroad. I'd traveled in India and Nepal. Fran had lived in West Africa and traveled in Nepal. We'd lived and worked together in Japan. Yet Rajasthan caught us off guard. It was as if we'd landed on another planet—and traveling on another planet can be overwhelming and exhausting.

Monkeys live all over Pushkar's rooftops—in fact, they live on top of a lot of towns and cities in India. I just saw one big fellow scamper across several rooftops' distance faster than most creatures, human or otherwise, could ever cover on the ground below. The longer-limbed, black-faced, silver-haired monkeys sit about watching the day rise like some people do, from a good vantage point—so serene, so animalistically spiritual. The little monkeys wrestle and chase one another playfully as the adults look on. I see an adult sit with legs over a ledge, just as a human might, with hands on knees, looking upon the town with intelligence. The huskier, red-faced, red-assed monkeys seem more bent on finding food and working independently than sitting up on a precipice watching the world go by.

Great blue flocks of pigeons circle the town, landing on a temple dome here, a ghat rooftop there, circling, landing, keeping the sky aflutter with wings and life. There's music of one sort or another coming from several quarters at once: traditional Indian folk music here in the Rainbow Hotel's rooftop restaurant, devotional chanting from the lake, and contemporary instrumental music from a music shop on the lane below. Pushkar is a swirling whirl-water of human and animal energy around the serene, all-seeing eye of the lake upon which this ancient town is built.

My take on Raju and the musicians yesterday is that, one, Raju was promoting them, and two—and more than that—the musicians were seeking support and promotion in a bigger way. They're seeking to have photos taken, especially with foreigners and potential sponsors, to show those others, like us, that indeed they're worthy of support. They've also had produced a cassette tape with about fifteen pieces on it, which I didn't buy because of my updated preference for disks but which may well be a promotional recording. Later in our room, upon further speculation, Fran and I carried on quite a silly fantasy of gathering this pair up in our arms—instruments, traditional garb, cassettes and all—and taking them back to the States with us to present to the now folk-music-appreciative listeners there and help them produce and promote an album, with contracts, producer, and a studio and the like. We both agreed, however, once we'd exhausted the ins and outs of this whimsy, that neither of us really cared to get into such a business—not us. But these musicians are every bit as authentic, charming, and skilled as any in the documentary *Latcho Drom* or in any folk recordings I've heard.

I haven't dropped a single word about the catastrophic Gujarat Republic Day earthquake, which occurred on the morning of January 26, 2001, while Fran and I were in Chennai. Devastating! simply. The town of Bhuj was completely leveled. The numbers of dead overall is approaching 20,000, and they're still clearing the rubble. Unfortunately, India is prime territory for total earthquake devastation, considering that Indian building practices are weak when codes are followed and horrific generally and considering that crooked builders and developers rarely adhere to code. Also, the Indian government has been very slow in responding to the disaster, both in getting there physically to save people and in getting the state up and running again, but also in being willing and prepared to accept aide from abroad. Many bodies, when teams finally got to them, had already begun to decay. India pays for the corruption and negligence it accepts. But the sheer numbers in this case, in the eyes of the world, I hope, is a wakeup call to the humanistic sentiment of the Indian collective consciousness—and conscience—that I also hope bears out at the government level.

Despite their sincere desire to have some hand in their own fate, to order their lives according to some well-designed plan, the tourists, the budget travelers, and the pilgrims to Pushkar, alike, succumb to—fall in love with—this terrible, tantalizing unknown that is Pushkar. They succumb to becoming entwined in its twisting lanes and to the prospect of, yes, possessing the very "exotic" artifact the imagination and desire had never known before—bangles, baubles, and bells; pots, puppets, and purses; silk scarves, saris, and slippers (with upturned toes); and icons, idols, and miniature paintings. They give themselves

to wandering and impulse, to wonder and imprudence, to perfume and stench both, inevitably—and to the magnificent, perfectly created Brahma bull as he swaggers bellowing out of an alley into the lane, scattering tourists and locals alike. Or to the cow whose fifth leg grows like an omen from her shoulder, or to her keeper, who, smiling, beckons alms. Nothing is good or bad but what the poor trained bones of the body feel as good or bad. Here in Pushkar the rules are homegrown and have risen with the town from Brahma's lotus-sprung lake to draw the hungry and the lost—and those who won't admit to being hungry and lost—to its center, to cool the overheated brow with sacred waters, to rub flowers into the skin, to chant the felt but vaguely understood words over the upward-turned eye of the lake. Herein is the gift, the secret: that one can't make oneself love, but must fall, always fall, in love, and that that falling is an ascension, a flight, a soaring of joy.

**February 13, 2001.** I just read an entry I wrote in Puri. Puri seems like a year ago, much as every day of our journey seems like two. When, in the evening, I remember what transpired in the morning, it feels as if it happened yesterday, not today, so swept up are we in the flow of our adventure, so much attuned to what's happening around us here and now, so totally is the past eclipsed by the present.

Once Fran and I had taken care of errands yesterday, we checked out an art shop with a lot of Indian miniatures. I saw several I coveted, knowing we'd only be able to afford one, at best. Of course, there are less expensive Mogul-style miniatures. We may purchase one good one and one cheaper one today.

At about four o'clock we headed out on foot toward the Shree Savithri Temple, located in the distance at the top of a small mountain next to town. Savithri was one of Brahma's two wives—the other being Gayatri, whose temple is located on the other small rocky mountain overlooking Pushkar. At the bottom of the stone steps that lead up to the temple, we purchased a bag of puffed rice. "Monkey food," insisted the vender stationed there. "You never know about these temple monkeys," I said to Fran as I paid the man. "They can get pretty irate if you don't have any food for them. They're much stricter keepers of temples than humans are."

Sure enough, when we'd climbed about halfway up to the temple, huffing and puffing, an enormous monkey sprang out of a thicket and came at me, meaning, I knew, to take the rice from me—forcibly, if need be. Instinctually, I lobbed, or rather pushed, the bag out away from me so it landed at the feet of the bandit, who snatched it up with what I would have to say was just a little too little triumph and carried it off into the brambles to eat—all of which I was sure he'd done before. My heart leapt, of course, and Fran was quite frightened, but it was the food that mattered to the ape and not us. I should have put the rice inside Fran's carry bag, where the scoundrel couldn't have seen it. But then maybe the sly fellow would have observed us hide the rice and insisted on taking Fran's bag as well. I had this suspicion that the puffed rice seller and this huge monkey were in cahoots. The monkey would now descend and return the bag of rice for a banana.

*Now* what would we have to present to the temple monkeys upstairs?

Once we reached the temple above, seen the temple digs and met the priest, we were standing or sitting about with a few others watching the light wane over the town. I had my camera set up on my tripod. Suddenly we heard screaming and galloping sounds coming from far below. A horse carrying two figures raced out onto the paved road leading into Pushkar, seeming to be out of control. A second horse was either in pursuit in order to rein in the out-of-control horse or was joining in on the fun. I was entertained, but the guy standing beside me, a Brit, seemed to think that the person screaming might fall off and be killed. I thought the opposite—that there was someone on the horse in control and that it was the passenger who was yelling to stop. The priest's son, who happened to be watching as well, claimed that a boy fell off as the horse entered town, but I didn't see such an accident. Anyway, all this happened far below us, making the horses and riders look like slow-moving dots, and we were like gods watching from high above, removed, hands off the foibles of the likes of humans below.

After breakfast the next day, we returned to the miniature shop to pursue purchasing the paintings I'd spotted the day before. This time we dealt with the brother of the artist we'd met earlier, who was so full of himself in the face of an opportunity to sell some expensive paintings to a couple of Americans that he claimed he meditated to the point that he could read people. Which also meant, he claimed, that he could read palms and, as it turned out, not very well—not that anyone can, according to my belief. After looking at our palms, he told us things about us that were only vaguely true or possibly correct, things that simply weren't true, and other things meant simply to appeal to our egos. I could see he was quite transparent, quite readable,

even without taking a look at his palm. He just wanted to make a sale—and with so much unnecessary grooming, ass-kissing, and subterfuge I had to laugh. But despite his total glibness, we ended up buying the two best pieces that I liked and got a couple less costly pieces thrown into the bargain to boot.

Now the fellow up the street who sold us the silk and nylon Kashmiri carpet was a whole other sort of merchant, with a whole other approach to making sales—to selling us, specifically, a carpet we spotted the day before on our way up to Shree Savitri temple and negotiated over on the way back. He was a bit ingratiating—"trying too hard," as Fran said to him—at first, but after a while he settled into a more direct, honest, yet somehow no less circuitous approach. He went on about how Indian merchants and touts put off the tourist by harassing them, by coming at them from so many angles that they make the shopping experience intolerable. Right on, I thought, and agreed with him. But all the more reason he stuck with his originally stated price of 3600 rupees (we spent 5700 rupees on the paintings). We couldn't budge the man, whose name was Jan, an inch on that carpet, and, in a way, I was amazed. Usually, by bantering, rationalizing, or trickery—by pretending to walk away—one can get a much lower, more blatantly desperate price thrown out or agreed on, which of course pleases the ears but also indicates just how wobbly the seller is. But I can live with having paid 78 dollars for a beautiful handmade carpet I'll carry home under an arm on the plane.

# The Many Legs to Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh

The trip back, first by bus, then by train, to Jaipur was smooth and relatively uneventful except that we just sort of barged our way onto a pseudo-compartment where there was a tangle of Indian guys with their bags strewn about, taking up way too much room, perhaps trying to save places for friends. It was quite crowded till some got off. But what was really interesting was that—not at all unusual or unacceptable in India—two young guys were all over each other, to the point that Fran was sure they were gay. Later, I told her I thought they were "bosom buddies," that men are freer in India to bond—and to do so physically. American men, straight guys, tend to need alcohol and/or sports to really get physical and affectionate with each other. And these same two young guys, who acted silly with grins and glances for Fran, asked if they could guide us around Jaipur, addressing me, of course. There is, by the way, a gay movement in India, with an outspoken, well-known gay rights advocate in the media, and there are guys in various

categories referred to in general as the "in between sex," noted particularly in Mumbai.

We're now back at the Athiti Guest House in Jaipur after our grand day of shopping in Pushkar and transition back to Jaipur. It was hard to pull ourselves away from Pushkar after only three nights—two full days. It's so comfortable, so peaceful, so interesting! We're still fantasizing about going back some day for a full month's stay. Rent an apartment, get into yoga, learn to play Indian violin, write some stories, and get to know some people—beyond shopping. Still, once we arrived at the Ajmer train station, I felt the capillaries snap, the trance break, and the mind suddenly turn toward the next major destination: Dharamsala. But again, just as—during our earlier stay in Jaipur—we were getting sick of India, feeling that we'd never need to come to this country again, we arrived in Pushkar, which redeemed our experience and our desire to stay and return.

When the alarm went off this morning in our room at the Atithi Guest House in Jaipur, I was extracted violently, like a newborn from a mother's womb, from one of the deepest sleeps I can remember. It's a great hotel for comfort and sleeping, since it's relatively quiet here and the beds are the coziest we've had. And I was pooped after our long day of business transactions and travel yesterday. But now we had to continue to wrench ourselves into action, because we had to catch our train within the hour.

We were poorly directed as to which coach was C1, so we ended up on a non-reservation car, which, by the second Jaipur

station, filled up to brimming. A loud, domineering, heavy-set grandmother, three mothers, and seven children were soon swarming, crying, complaining, and shouting commands all around us in our compartment. Most significantly, they inched and pried their way into the compartment until all of them were sitting on the two benches and children were sleeping on the floor—and on my feet. Biscuit crumbs and vegetable chapatti flakes sifted through the upper bench slats onto us like greasy snow. Fran was certain she'd end up with lice in her hair and asked me in advance if I'd pick through her scalp, as a mother ape does her offspring, to remove any unwanted critters. The seats were as hard as the hardest wood because that's what they were made of: hardwood. Men smoked beedies and argued over seating arrangements. We kept a close eye on our bags up on a nearby rack, especially as we were about to disembark and as there was a rather suspicious-looking little character eyeballing our luggage. Rolling along on the train, Fran managed to write, but I was too uncomfortable holding and protecting our newly purchased paintings, in their packaging, upright on my lap. Still, we made good time and enjoyed interacting with an accountant student who was traveling with his mother (returning from Jaipur to Delhi after attending the funeral of his father's father) and a father and son business team sitting across from us. Family is wonderfully warm and tight in India, a subject we touched on with the student, much in contrast with the apparently decaying family unit in the United States.

**February 14, 2001.** We're now half undone, half unpacked, in our very first "retiring room," at the Delhi station. 150 rupees has purchased us virtual seclusion in the midst of sheer madness for twelve cool dark hours—actually nine hours—

as we wait for our ongoing connection to Pathankot and ultimately Dharamsala. We've just had enough of going out into and getting around monstrous, frenzied cities, trying to see a few sights. We're not seeing any of the great cave sites (except Mahabalipuram), we've bypassed Agra and the Taj Mahal, and now we're sneaking through Delhi without seeing the Red Fort, etc. Ten weeks just isn't enough time to see and do everything in India, let alone traveling by train making awkward, contrary connections. Only the mind can go two ways at once, and apparently our minds were.

The retiring room at the Old Delhi Station is well accoutered, as good quality as many hotel rooms we've taken in India. It's quite spacious and includes a large bed, a toilet, a sink, a shower, a desk, and several chairs within its walls. At 300 rupees for 24 hours, one could "do" Delhi easily from such a central base, although the barrage of touts and rickshaw wallahs, upon every foray into the city, could get a bit old. However, there's something European literary romantic about holing up in the shadowy recesses of this massive complex and reading and writing. I just wouldn't want to get tuberculosis for the sake of literary romance. It's Valentine's Day today!

# Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh

**February 16, 2001.** After the many legs of the journey from Pushkar, we have arrived in Dharamsala and are sitting in the café known as Nick's Kitchen. It's so good to return to the land of the Buddha and to the Tibetan people, whom I respect and admire for their strength and peace and toughness and for their amicability and ease to get to know. For this is the home of the Dalai Lama in exile till the Chinese remove themselves from Tibet and till he, along with thousands of other refugees, can return home. There's such a common sense of mission about the people of Dharamsala concerning freeing Tibet and protecting the environment—along with all the spiritual and physical New Age gewgaw. Dharamsala was once a British hill station, where colonialists could escape the heat of the lowlands of the subcontinent below, but now that the Dalai Lama and Tibetan refugees have settled here, it's become a kind of curiosity, a tourist trap of sorts, a perch for countless beggars, lepers, and guru wannabes. It's chilly here, especially at night, which I find stimulating and refreshing and Fran finds uncomfortable and depressing.

Ah, the elusive yoga class—in India, of all places. That is, the elusive *yogi*. How often we've found reference in our guide book, on posters stuck on walls about town, or from fellow yoga practitioners, then wandered about town looking for the glorious ashram or yoga classes and learned that the yogi or instructor has flown the coop—gone to Gujarat or, today, here in Dharamsala, gone to Paris! I said to our informant, "Seems like a lovely place to be on a day like this." Fran has managed to participate in only one yoga class so far, in Pushkar, and even then it was poorly conducted by a Western woman who had been practicing with the absent yogi for only a couple months. Yogis are making too much money if they can pull up the roots of practice and devotion to teaching in order to travel the world on a whim. And there's no info around that indicates the yogi is absent or the ashram is closed. Of course, Fran has parted temporarily from her instructorship in Seattle, but she is not a "swami" or "guru" connected with a town or village in India, and she made sure all her classes are covered by qualified instructors at the athletic club and the acupuncture clinic where she is "employed." She's let her practice slide a bit too, but then traveling in India, surprisingly, is not as conducive to practicing yoga as she'd thought: It's dirty, limited in space and cramped, and tiring—even traveling lying down on the train exhausts us, and we always have to rest up when we arrive at our destination city or town.

As for our yoga-poetry mixed media performance project, which we had anticipated researching and rehearsing on this journey, I've found that, as with other, full-length writing projects, such a complex energy- and focus-involving undertaking is too much to attempt as we try to flow with train and shifting geography and culture and weather and

mood, trying to stay open-eyed and absorptive of experience as it comes along. It's quite an approachable and well-defined project but made more for a relatively stationary situation where we have a clean space and research facilities near to hand and can put aside longer periods of time to devote to the project.

So once again I resort to—embrace—the journal, writing in it as circumstance permits, in coffee shop or on our bed in our hotel room, inscribing whatever about the day stands out, whatever memory, thought, or mood spurs my pen to move. Hence, too, my interest in reading Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen,* the pseudo-prose poem form being fluid, sinuous, and poetic enough to represent the rolling, continuous experience of travel, village, and city life—in motion, always in motion. The broken line in poetry tends to be more about stopping—or being stopped—in time. It's more meditative, more momentary, fleeting, exploratory, or conclusive, at least in its descriptiveness.

It's interesting that the town of Dharamsala, sitting upon the feet of the Himalayas and overlooking the Indian Plain below (in another country, these hills would be mountains), with its snow above and streambeds all about, is experiencing a drought. There's no snow this year in this area. Our hotel owner, Tapa, said that in all his lifelong memory he's never seen the likes of such a dry spell. And there's only worse to come, considering it's the middle of February. Summer would be tough on the town and on the many travelers, tourists, and devotees who come here; as it is, we're paying ten rupees for a bucket of hot water for bathing.

So, how do I feel about my goals and purposes on this journey? Yes, I've relaxed, my jaw muscles have atrophied; I've let go of productivity—my work-intensive life in Seattle and Ocean Shores; I can, anxiety free, drift for a day or a week with no expectations; and my knee has returned to normal, the swelling has diminished almost completely, and there's no stiffness or pain. So I've made some headway physically and spiritually, as I intended. But the real theme of this journey, which I hadn't planned or anticipated, is contrast—that is, what traveling twenty-one years ago in India was about for me and what doing so in 2001 has been about for me. Whereas I remember mainly how difficult it was to travel in India in 1980, how uncomfortable I was, how much I came, in a couple months, to appreciate my own country—now my solid, magnanimous, impregnable soul (psyche) seems impenetrable, impervious to obtrusion, nuisance, noise, or noxiousness. Yet I'm open now and then to people and experiences that I might have missed, passed up, or ignored when I was 28 years old. Sometimes even the dust, the horns, the beggars, the touts, the shit, and the chaos become a strange and beautiful dissonant music which I can appreciate much as I might appreciate a piece by Bartok, Hindemith, or Schönberg. This is not to brag, but to state a fact or to describe. But sometimes I worry that, in this heightened state of mind, I may lose something in experiencing ethereally but not intensely. I was changed forever when I returned to the United States after traveling in Asia and especially in India back in 1980. How will I feel once I return home this time?

I know this contrast in relation to Fran too, as she has struggled some with the dust and smoke and stress of this kind of travel, having had a couple colds, difficulty functioning, and trouble especially in Jaipur, keeping her spirits up, even though

coming to travel in India was a dream of hers. I've been able to be solidly there for her and to cheer her up at times. I know she wishes we could have stayed in Pushkar for the remainder of our time in India, but I feel we need to stick to at least the skeleton of our plan and to cover some of the ground that takes us to such contrasting environs as Kovalam and Dharamsala, Mahabalipuram and Pushkar.

Another purpose that, together, we're succeeding in, which we've not taken too seriously till now, is purchasing some India artifacts for our Little Renaissance (Fran's and my concept for spirituality, yoga, art, and health in the retreat we built on the Washington coast), especially for the India room. I'm very pleased with the Kashmiri carpet and the miniature paintings we bought in Pushkar. The rings and bracelets we had made are okay, though the bracelet bands are too skimpy for the large size of the moonstones. We had our eyes on a Rajasthani carpet in Jaipur, but in our busy-ness there we forgot to get it, so now we're looking at them in Dharamsala. It seems they're everywhere!

**February 18, 2001.** "Spiritual" is on my mind. There must be a spiritual approach that isn't egotistical, vain, phony, masturbatory, empty, misguided, etc., one that also somehow contributes not only to the elevation of the mind and body of the individual but also to the betterment of all humankind. Religions, at their best, have striven to do this, to provide a means—rituals and practices, icons and hierarchies—for the sake of reaching and touching the higher, the divine, the holy—as well as providing systems of morality and explanations, through stories and myths, for the creation of the universe, the religion itself, and its deities, prophets, and saints. But

religions are also about joining the club, being a joiner, having to go to church, etc., when everyone else goes, and about judging others if they turn from the way or never set out on the chosen way in the first place. Worse, religions become malevolently righteous war machines that murder others of other faiths and beliefs, ethnicities, or even sects. For example the Catholic Church during the Inquisition and the Crusades, even missionaries to beautiful cultures and ways of life. Few religions have really done much for the Earth. In fact, if religions were such great efficacious institutions, why isn't the world a better place than it is? Why such a mess where religion has the strongest hold? Still, I wonder what the world would look like without religions. Chaos, animalistic, savage, self-destructive? I don't know. There's no knowing. Perhaps we'd be simple hunter-gatherers, animal husbands, and farmers occasionally conducting raids on other tribes and communities. Besides, religion isn't the only force that organizes and "civilizes." Cities, for example, grow to be what they are because people seek opportunity and sociability. And religion can be benign, even benevolent, and many religions allow for the individual to spiritualize, to connect, in personal ways. Some folks need religion, any religion, because they are down and out, in a bad way, broken up or broken down, lost or confused. I can think of several examples of people I know or have known who fit this description, who have turned to religion for solace or answers.

My friend and fellow sonar technician on the USS *Rogers,* when I was in the Navy, was an irritable, disagreeable, sometimes self-consciously cantankerous fellow who really had no excuse for his negative attitude that I was aware of or could see. I suppose he didn't much like himself or he felt impotent in the face of reality or of making more of himself or his life. He was a

very disagreeable fellow, one way or the other, always snapping back at other division personnel or making negative comments about himself or others. Then, one day, he found Scientology, or it found him, and he went for it, apparently feeling deep down that he needed to get a hold of himself and make a change. He paid the $500 up front! He was ripe and ready for it! And lo and behold, by the end of the six months, he was a changed man! I've never seen the likes of it! He was thereafter pleasant, agreeable, and even laughed! He was also able to talk about how he'd changed. And the main lessons he learned from his scientology experience was to be affirmative about his own life, about life itself, and that, if he applied himself, if he believed he could lead the kind of life he wanted to lead, he'd be in control. Responsibility. But when Scientology asked him to pay up for the next level, he bowed out, saying that he'd already learned what he needed to learn. Now are we talking religion here, spirituality, or psychology?

I believe it's all psychology, all in the mind. Religions, morals, myths, and spirituality are all about reaching for something higher, and not till the majority of human beings recognize that all the world, including "God" and gods, is of our own making, will we take the first step toward making the world a better place. Of course, consensus, or at least mutual acceptance of differences, is the big challenge. However, I do see a movement in that direction historically in that there has been a movement away from animism and pantheistic religions toward monotheism and even abstract images and concepts of God. When we see God and Nature as one and the same, in my opinion, then we will have gotten somewhere. And that we human beings are one with nature is just as important to perceive.

So where does all this leave "spirituality"? That is, if humans are of Nature and Nature is God, all of the immutable Universe? Simple. My humanistic, environmentalist, atheist definition would go something like this: Spirituality concerns the nature of the relationship one has with self and other, that is, with one's own mind, body, one's past, present, future, change, the unknown (some overlap here), death, the Earth, one's family, especially one's mother and father, material possessions, etc. This is a spirituality about the inner relation to the outer (see Tibetan Buddhism), of self to other, of being to non-being, of mutability to non-mutability—not about a separate spirit that transcends the body to go to Heaven, some other paradise elsewhere, some hell or higher plane so as to return to Earth reincarnate, but spirit as in "He has a good spirit." "She's a spirited woman." "His spirits were high." Or "Their love was a spiritual one." I mean spirit as a state, condition, or attitude of mind and body in relation to unpredictable, uncontrollable, often disinterested society and world. Spiritual is as spiritual practices.

And now the sun rises toward zenith and the haze bleaches and blurs the mountainsides, villages, and terraces, and I know that I have found some peace in my life, which has partly been about making compromises with my own demands and expectations. Where I've overstrained myself to make my greatest dreams come true (since no one but I can make my dreams come true, since they involve concentration and work) I've had to relent. It's always about changing what you can as you can and accepting what you can't. And in this relenting and accepting is the gift and the spiritual growth, a certain magnanimousness and wholeheartedness. But I shan't sell

myself short: Personal myths are built on courageous struggles. Passions and dreams are of "my nature," and I cannot ignore them. To pursue a dream is evermore fulfilling than to ignore it altogether. I cannot begin to determine how much I've grown through applying myself to the problem I chose to pose for myself, that of, for example, taking up violin again, as an adult. This is how one creates meaning for oneself, since, according to my belief, one is not born to predetermined meaning, except to survive and perpetuate the species. And one way to create meaning is to create personally and socially meaningful art, to grow and become more socially viable and self-sufficient, and hopefully emotionally, spiritually, and materially self-sufficient in the process, as well.

So now we lie on our straw mat on the clipped dry grass of a fallow terrace, just below Taxi Stand Road, a spot we noted on our walk to Dal Lake yesterday as a lovely spot to picnic and escape the noise and busy-ness of town. Crows and small birds chirp and make a racket, buteos circle the sky above the mountainside and Dharamsala, and the sun, just our side of the ever-accumulating mountain clouds, turns on to warm our whole sense of the world, as we do our best to let the moment at times be all. I was wondering if, because crow numbers are so low here, the buteos challenge their population, and, sure enough, just now it seems a buteo has found out a crow's nest, swooping in around a hemlock nearby such that several low-voiced crows come flying in an attempt to run it off. The crows here sound like ravens, or these are the crows that have become the biggest and strongest through the process of survival of the fittest, thanks to the buteos that keep them on the wing. Crows have no such prevalent enemy in Ocean Shores that I've

ever seen, except perhaps owls. They're flagrant, obnoxious, and numerous—though I'm rather fond of the troublemakers. After all, it was Cooper's hawks that marauded the robin's nest and murdered and ate the nestlings. And I like the Cooper's hawks even more.

Life is always in balance. The problem is the nature or quality of that balance, especially if one believes that every force is countered by an equal and opposite force and that this principle is universal, in physical reality as well as in psychic reality.

So the sun, though it is near to dropping behind the trees on the hill above us, continues to turn on its heat, and we continue to sink into the afternoon, and the sound truck that rolls this way and that on the little roads above and below us, announcing "refrigerators, microwave ovens, sound systems, televisions," etc., hardly scathes our peace with its grotesque advertising of American and Japanese goods and values. The mind can be selective: The horns, the advertising, the rumbling of trucks, the noise of people passing or working nearby—falls back into the background and the bird calls spring forth into my ears like the finest and sweetest of music. Even the subconscious mind can choose, being as much under the influence of the conscious mind as the conscious mind is under the influence of the subconscious mind.

Why have we come to Dharamsala? Why are we here? Ostensibly to meet with Marybeth, Fran's student from the States, and to experience the "Tibet problem" and Tibetan exile firsthand. It wasn't until we went to the Book Worm

bookstore this morning, however, that I discovered my real purpose in being here, when I met Dawa Thakchog, who, like the woman we met at the Tibetan Temple yesterday, is a teacher at the T.C.V. School (orphanage). Dawa was very open, honest, and informative about her life as a refugee, separated from her parents at age eight, about her life in Dharamsala, and about the Tibet problem and the Dalai Lama's mission. She was brought over the border as a child by folks from her village as the opportunity for escape arose, was settled at the orphanage, grew up there with the help of unknown sponsors, received teacher training there, here in Dharamsala, and a year ago got a job at the orphanage as a teacher of all subjects to small kids—other more recent arrivals from Tibet. She told me that she was grateful that she had the opportunity to come to India and that she and her parents all believe her coming here was best. She's seen her parents only once since she left, in the eighteen years she's been here. She was able to meet them for two days at the border, in the narrow swath that is a no-man's land between Tibet and India. That was about six years ago. Her parents had to pretend they were porters in order to fool the Chinese authorities and reach the border. There were tears in Dawa's eyes as she told this story and when she described the destruction of Llasa (the religious and administrative capital of Tibet) by the Chinese. I realized then why I had come here: to feel more what the refugees here feel and to determine how I might be of assistance in the future. If I ever come here again, it will be to volunteer to teach English to new arrivals, or perhaps to train teachers. In the meantime, I'll write about the problem when and how I can in the future. Dawa and I exchanged addresses; I will definitely write her. She is a fellow teacher, self-sufficient in

many ways, but I would like to provide her one more contact in this half-hearted world, and she can be my real, human connection to Tibet and Tibetan refugees—that the very real, human problem be something less of an abstraction as I bust myself with life back home.

Otherwise, we've mostly walked here and there, as there are some seven roads spoking out from the Dharamsala bus stand intersection just below us, our hotel being on TIPA road, named after the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, located up the hill about a quarter mile. The day we arrived, we hiked up to the Institute, but it was closed. However, there were half a dozen children playing just inside the gate, several of whom immediately ran over to me to be swung by the arms in circles till we were all dizzy and stumbling. The next day, we walked the rather long way along Taxi Stand Road to so-called "sacred" Dal Lake. It was little more than a big puddle, mucky, slimy, and smelly—and containing a goodly school of medium sized, for the most part, orange carp. Every moment in every place has its tentative fall of the crystals of shattered colored glass in the kaleidoscope, its own particular mood, good or bad, and despite the disappointment of Dal Lake, we sat and enjoyed eating oranges, biscuits, and almonds as the red-assed monkeys subtly crept out and converged on us like mute beggars hoping for a handout while a frightened pariah dog barked, backing farther and farther away, at the intruders to the lake. Meanwhile, a band and procession approached up another road till it finally stopped in front of the Shiva temple beside the lake, so that the "king" might dismount from his palanquin and climb the stairs, escorted, of course, to perform his royal puja at the temple. His costume included a tinfoil crown. The upshot of this hike was that we discovered Taxi Stand Road, which, till it turns

toward upper Dharamsala, is a lovely, level, shadowy lane that curves along the side of the mountain, all overseen by birds and monkeys. We saw a Westerner stop to read at the abandoned terraces where we went to picnic earlier today.

We finally met with Marybeth, who just showed up at our hotel late yesterday afternoon. She's a very self-possessed and independent woman who has taken a job as production manager for an American company that deals in Tibetan or Tibetan-style textile goods and other handicrafts. She's been here in Dharamsala a year so far, has just moved into a different house, and loves her job and living here, abroad. She was Fran's student briefly till she was swept off to Dharamsala for this exciting job that just fits her. We were to visit the production center she oversees tomorrow, but I've had second thoughts about breaking up our last morning in Dharamsala traveling down to her place of work and back when we have to check out of our hotel by noon, catch the bus to Pathankot at three in the afternoon, and board the train for Saharanpur at 9:30 in the evening. We need to call her. Nevertheless, it was nice to meet her.

The story we'll probably get the most mileage out of from Dharamsala when we return to the States will be about Dhuruv Dev Singh. When he walked through the door of Nick's Kitchen, where we were finishing up breakfast, I thought, "What a strange, sickly looking fellow!" I felt I should look away, back to my writing, when he rather anxiously, expectantly, looked our way. As Roethke wrote, "I feel my fate in what I cannot fear." The harder I tried to ignore this fellow, the more he sidled over toward us. He had a strange Western appearance: dark yet ashen complexion, hair in an early Beatles style but colored a reddish orange with cheap dye, one eye to the wall

and impossible not to look at when I knew full well I should look into the eye that looked straight ahead. There were beds of scars and wrinkles around his eyes, belying his age and perhaps the nature of his experience. He reminded me much too much of Marty Feldman in the movie *Young Frankenstein.* So when he told us that an organization had invited him, as a yogi, to attend a convention in Taiwan, that he was indeed a yogi, had with him a small, dog-eared booklet of himself doing asanas, including descriptions and explanations to prove it, I have to admit I was amused at the corny twists of travel experience, especially when it comes to "spirituality." But the kinks in the line had only just begun to appear. Soon, having invited himself to join us at our table, he was throwing out clichés about universal love and telling us how, having only just then learned our names, because of our marvelous complementary (a word he did not use) personalities, we make a great couple. All along he was working the sponsorship angle, suggesting Fran start her own ashram, at least get her own studio, so he could teach as a visiting yogi, and suggested, furthermore, that I introduce yoga in my writing classes at the college in Seattle—Dhuruv being the means to accomplishing that feat, as well. Meanwhile, he was working on the prospect of conducting a couple sessions the next day with Fran. She opted for one the following day and then regretted it immediately after we left the restaurant and parted company with the man. She determined to somehow cancel with him, especially after we reviewed our interaction. Fortunately, we ran into him at the bus stand as we were looking about for the rumored candlelight procession for Tibet to begin. Fran, without hesitation, canceled on the spot, saying, "We've got a full day planned tomorrow," then turned toward the German Bakery nearby, saying over her shoulder to me,

"Are you coming, Rick?" I patted the poor, desperate, aspiring yogi who wanted to save the world with universal love on the shoulder and caught up with Fran, relieved as well.

# On the Way to Rishikesh, Uttarakhand

**February 19, 2001**

***The Trouble Is…***

*The trouble is the mind,*
*which, like a butterfly,*
*can alight upon a leper*
*by the side of the road,*
*then flit in an instant*
*to picture hugging Mom*
*with clean hands and arms*
*half way around the world.*

***Why Do I Just Not Move?***

*Why do I just not move*
*when yet another young man*
*comes to use the toilet*
*in the train station waiting room*
*and leaves the door beside me ajar,*
*the acrid stench of urine and moth balls*
*streaming out and burning my nostrils?*

*Am I lazy?*
*Have I moved too much?*
*Maybe I need the pain, the discomfort*
*of the care less world.*
*Maybe the bad smell*
*keeps me alive and alert.*

*I inhale all the deeper*
*just to make sure.*
*My nostrils have never flowed freer.*
*I could not survive*
*a sensory deprivation tank.*

***Live Here Now?***

*Sometimes I remember to live here now,*
*and all sounds, all voices,*
*grow huge and comforting around me.*
*But why here just now?*

*For the tasteless, altogether practical*
*black-and-white-chip wine-colored tiles,*
*for the curious mix of Indians lounging*
*here in the station's waiting room?*

*For the man who carries in his own bedding,*
*rolls it out on a palette,*
*and now sleeps, or pretends to sleep,*
*perhaps, too, surrounded by the warmth of sound?*

*Or for the crank who removes his pants in front of us*
*to enter the toilet, then pulls them on again,*
*watching us not watch him? For all this*
*I live here now?*

*But isn't this how it usually goes?*
*We seek more when we fear there's less,*
*only to find there's a pleasant touch of insanity*
*in the smoking man's purple jacket?*

# Rishikesh, Uttarakhand

**February 20, 2001.** After a rollicking four-hour bus ride from Dharamsala down to Pathankot; then dinner, reading, and writing in the station there; a nine-hour trip sleeping above two army officers in our compartment—who were not at all interested in talking to us—to Saharanpur; a two and a half hour flight by bus through Haridwar and on to Rishikesh; and a four-kilometer jolting Tempo (auto-rickshaw) ride through town, we've arrived at the Yoga Niketan Guest House, across the river from the district called Swargashram—just downstream from the impressively long, well-built Ramjhula Bridge. Much as we knew immediately upon opening the door to the balcony in Kanyakumari that we simply had to stay at the hotel there overlooking the town and with a view of the Vivekananda Memorials, so we knew immediately upon opening the door to the balcony here that this was exactly where we had to stay in Rishikesh. The finely clipped garden one floor below, the sandy beach beyond the wall, steps descending to the edge of the river, the whole majestic, sun-sparkling expanse of the Ganges flowing beyond the steps, the temple town of Swargashram and bathing ghats lining the opposite bank, immediately possessed us. Where the

riverbed is dry, folks break with sledges and/or gather rocks for construction elsewhere; one old, beat-up, discolored dump truck stands waiting amidst the river rocks. Just now two river rafts, no doubt carrying travelers from abroad, float by slowly, nearing the shallow rapids where sunlight glistens. Two kayaks race alongside. Atop larger rocks, jutting from the river, stand cormorants waiting to dive for fish. The whole world here shines and glistens as the sun nears zenith and human activity slows to a midday lull. Happy to have arrived here, we get a full six nights, as a sort of climax and last holdout before we turn our focus more and more toward home.

Though Rishikesh has its own beauty, charm, and interest, Fran's here first and foremost to do yoga, and this guest house is connected to the Yoga Niketan Ashram, the sessions there (up the hill from here) being free for those who stay at the hotel. There are lots of rules as applicable to the ashram, many of which aren't applicable to us who aren't actually staying at the ashram proper, much less applicable to me who doesn't intend to participate at all.

Despite my ever-thickening complexity, I grow simpler every day. Though I must admit to a modicum of comfort as I age, little beyond my visions of truth matter anymore—and making a gift of the word to those who will have it, those whose spirit can endure. And the vision grows bolder, both more difficult and easier. There is a simple exchange of invisible substances: delusion for truth and pain for enlightenment. The body, too, grows light with the psyche. The body must follow where the mind must eventually precede. Yes, truth, a clear and triumphant view of reality, no matter how monstrous, how tiny and insidious, how buried beneath the surface or too big to see

right before our eyes, becomes a substance like sugar that wakes the cumbersome body to light. Such a long spear is the body the point of which is the mind's eye. It's such a streamlined spear that the mind can throw it at an as-yet-unseen target just beyond the last. As an adolescent, I gave up the slingshot, as a young man guns, but at middle age I still pierce, with a third eye, the unassuming unknown. And if I do not share my vision, then this too may be just as well, for, by necessity, we may be in perfect balance—though not in harmony!

***The Sea Has Thrown Up a Turtle***

*The sea has thrown up a turtle*
*and the dogs and crows are grateful.*
*Another foreigner passes up*
*one of too many lepers,*
*he who, in his own country, is not rich,*
*and the beggar is grateful to be reassured*
*that he is not worthy of a kind, a pitying,*
*a guilty or mindless rupee.*
*And the aspirant at the lecture,*
*who holds beneath his solid confusion*
*one or two terrible, albeit trifling, secrets,*
*is grateful to hear the swami agree*
*that super-consciousness is amoral,*
*that the world is not a drama.*
*Later, lounging on the hotel balcony,*
*overlooking the holy Ganga,*
*he does not flinch or smile*
*as a hawk plucks the eye*
*from a still squirming fish.*
*He wonders why he should bother*

*to try to remember an image*
*that then is meaningless,*
*then, with love welling out of nowhere,*
*turns again to kill the Buddha.*

Once again I believe we have stumbled on paradise here in Rishikesh, the first time having been Pushkar. And the reason I believe these places are light and powerful—and magical—is that the spiritual energy overpowers the commercial or "wannabe" energy. True believers, whether the superstitious, the religious, or the highly spiritual, come here from afar to pray, bathe, spread the ashes of the dead, meditate, practice yoga, or just plain feel deeply, at the river, in the river, near the river, in temple, at ashram, or out on balconies (as in my case and in the case of our neighbor). It's real, not phony. And we're truly standing on the very toenails of the Himalayas, where the Ganges ceases its relentless cascading to level out on the Indian plain. Pushkar had the same feel, but there, instead, Brahma threw down a lotus flower to form a lake and not a river. Sure, Puri had a nice beach with beautiful waves and good swimming. Kovalam, too, was a nice place to enjoy the beach, but neither had the inspiring fervor and heartwarming light of Pushkar or Rishikesh. Kanyakumari had a touch of this magic, but not such a palpable concentration. I can see Fran and me coming back here for a full yoga program and writing project.

I'm such an austere, even severe, isolationist, so hard do I believe intimacy must be fought for. One can be entangled, thrashing about for escape, in a dense, vine-strung, thorny jungle and be altogether alienated by it. The illustrious Dhuruv

Dev Singh has said that love is all around us; you just have to allow yourself to feel it. But, one, it's a great leap of faith that love of this sort isn't just a human construct; and, too, much leans on the word, the idea, of "allow." To address the first problem, I'm not sure that nature, that animals—that many human beings—can "love," in the sense that sage Dhuruv means. Now "compassion" is another kind of feeling or love, one that is developed through experience and discipline, a particularly high human virtue. As for the second problem, to "allow" oneself to experience or express—especially express—such love as implied here, requires courage, an ability to transcend fears and delusions and walls, a love that few human beings are capable of experiencing or expressing. It definitely was not love I felt emanating from the honest and selfless Dhuruv, but a major—almost desperate—self-promotion and pedanticism. I'm sorry, but I tend not to trust those who speak of universal love. It's hard enough to "love the one you're with," let alone to love all of humankind, much less trust every gold seeker that comes along looking for sponsorship back home. Love is what love does.

No matter the system of belief, no matter the view, no matter how far into space and time, how big or small, one sees, the feet must carry the mind to a wall, must show the mind it lives in a room, because even infinity and eternity, the universe and the quark, must be the mind's walls. The mind cannot simply free-float in nothingness; yet only the mind can imagine something like nothingness, and nothingness can only be imagined. And what about the poor body, which the mind leaves behind on its cerebral forays and escapades, the body which first and foremost instructs the mind, teaches it everything it knows, how it

prefers a floor—the Earth, the sea—beneath its feet, walls to provide security and privacy, a place with which to identify, an orientation. Earth skin to rub up against, Earth blood to drink, Earth bones to break and be broken by. And Earth heart, which has its own walls, which the body, of course, knows well.

**February 21, 2001**

***Hard Sell***

*I am not of this world,*
*but I am hungry.*

*God is love,*
*but your every penny helps.*

*Chants flow from the mouths of ascetics*
*as the Ganga flows from the Himalayas.*

*The River Ganga is the holiest river in the world,*
*all the more because I told you so.*

*I have a special gift of seeing:*
*Let me see your palm.*

*We have a crystal*
*for whatever ails you.*

**February 22, 2001.** Beyond the river of faith, there is a river. I would like to say there is more than this, but the closer and longer I look, the more I see a simple but no less—maybe even more—beautiful and real flowing-by of water. Yet I see a man across the river, too, bathe himself in the river with a fervor I cannot deny.

Beyond the river of faith, the great animal known as science strains to show its wild guesses are valid and true. All this from the seed that is an eye, which, like the stomach, does not want to die or sink into some dirty oblivion.

The river of faith is a bed whose sheets whip slowly in a wind we would rather not say is gravity. Monkeys gather in Rishikesh because they are thirsty—and because the stone gods here or anywhere else can't actually eat the offerings of fruit and rice that devotees place at their feet. Can't we see that, like us, the monkeys are the gods?

The river of faith is as much about rock as it is about water. The eye says this is not that and that not this, but I also see a river of stone, which flows with or against, but as one, with the river. The river makes stone and stone makes the river, and how do we hold it all together in our best moments? How do we see anything at all except that light entices our eyes into seeing what it wants us to see? Light's the miracle; if only we can see it and hold it in our hands!

I listen to the yells, the chants. I watch the aspirants and the sickly bathe, I see one man submerging himself for as long as he can hold his breath, assuming the fetal position, struggling against and flowing with the whole length of history. And the river, the one made of water, just flows on, not recognizing one birth from another, one death from another.

Still the river of faith, faithless or not, is powerful, and strong, propelling me to capture some fleeting passing of its endless movement. A river, faithless or not, is no small matter; so much spills toward and into it; so much is carried along by it, so much carried away. And so much is altered by its movement. I cannot ever think quite the same again about rivers. Births, deaths, faithless or not, inevitably take place by the river where

creatures, human or otherwise, give themselves to its great and always unexplainable passing.

What I see through the balcony door as I sprawl on the bed next to Fran, who is reading yoga poems, is the River Ganga, nearer to its source, at Rishikesh. I see a weighty flock of ducks, copper in the haze, rise slowly, steadily, in flight upstream. The occasional big fish breaks the slow jade surface with a white splash. Kids, hands holding noses, quickly dunk themselves near the opposite shore, as quickly pop back up into the salvation of warm air and light. Soon they are throwing stones into the river.

I see haze that seems to lift the whole world into light. I see big rocks, smoothed by the river, waiting stoically for their next incarnation. I see ghats, stairways into water, low functional buildings, not a single crumbling stupa or ancient carving. And it doesn't matter. I see two crows working the world for what it'll give, for what domain they can make of it, but giving in to what all of us must give in to: the ultimate superiority of reality, not to be penetrated to some imagined core or truth, not to be controlled completely, not to be made into a completely other world. I see the mountainsides and the trees rising through the doorway, almost without dimension, texture, or color, as if to turn to pure light and disappear from this world. But my tenacious memory knows otherwise; I've climbed such mountains, and in just such a transcendent white light.

I too have a certain faith to which I hold, certain assumptions I go to sleep with and wake up with—that the next day will arrive and cool night shall come, that my heart will continue beating into the next moment. That I shall learn something more of this life as I look deeper and further, closer and harder,

and as I reconstruct my vision in words and lines and stanzas. There's too much to see out the balcony door, too much to be contained in a rectangle of light. I am grateful for infinity, for rivers flowing and haze that makes the mind reel, for these eyes that strain to open and see the impossible All.

And were I an asshole who doesn't want to drop his few rupees into the pot of good will, were I the ultimate cynic who has to spout daggers and poison darts, knock with knuckles of nasty nonsense the numbskull brow, then I'd have to say Rishikesh is nonsense and full of fools who, like the crumb-bums lost in the dark of medieval times, want everything of what they can't see and nothing of what they can, but buy a few bangles just the same, just in case the real thing is the real thing. Into the Ganga go the blossoms and with them the plastic bag. Over the footbridge go the feet, right and left, side to side, green to greener to greenest, and with them the forbidden motorcycle too, at death-defying speeds. Rafters seek exhaustion out of macho camaraderie in the midst of peace and tranquility that only pervades the peace and tranquility. The birdsong is as beautiful as birdsong gets, yet the song has been sung long, in terms of micro-time, before it reaches the ear, hardly the real thing anymore. Reality, beauty, truth, forever out of reach, the bird as it sings as good as dead and here all these dumbly obsessive-compulsive aspirants to another world splash and chant and smear pigments and gong bells and beg in the sanctioned spirit of begging while the ever-growing carp gulp detritus of pujas (offerings) and dogs seek out the ripest shit and the crows steal the unattended meal on the table and the gods, in their stony stateliness, crumble too slowly to see. But then, only rarely am I such an asshole, such a cynic, and this has, after all, only been an exercise.

Just up the shore the monkey-man-clown-performer-beggar washes his makeup off in the all-encompassing, all accepting waters of the Ganga. I had exchanged pig grunts and monkey screeches with him up on the road. The sunlit world is his dressing room, the river his basin. But the performance was rough; allowing my natural curiosity free rein, I was hardly struck by his bluff. Now comes off the red robes. On again he pulls his pants. And now that the arbitrary five o'clock transition has rolled around again, what shall he do to turn heads and drum up coins? I wish him the best, as I wish all the players, all the scammers, the secretly happy and the truly poor, the best, but I'm no gold mine, no indiscriminate appreciator of rough-hewn, makeshift folk art and tricks, though I've gotten too much out the monkey man already, and for that, when I see him next, I shall drop him a rupee. For all I know, he may be one of Rishikesh's greats.

Yesterday I could hardly write. The theme of the River of Faith was too big too soon. It needed time to simmer, to flit about my psyche, gathering language for the task. I wasn't sure how I felt. After all, how can I condemn all of civilization, all of humanity that puts, according to tradition or due to the unbearable weight of existence, too much faith elsewhere, other than in the self or in humanity? Anyway, why the hell am I, myself, here in India—in Rishikesh specifically? Certainly not to find or build some pinnacle of perspective to feel above it all—superior. I am here because I want to know, to feel this powerful energy for what it is, whatever it is, and to see, to experience a different world, with different people, sights, sounds, colors and patterns, tastes, and smells. In this, then, I am like a child, as I should be, and not a god in mind and covert word.

The power has gone out. Our gas "tube" blinked off and simultaneously the amplified chanting from Parmarth Ashram across the river abruptly attenuated to near silence, since mere human voices can hardly reach my ears from there. Ah! They apparently have a generator as—all of a sudden—the powerful, snapping, collective chanting is back. I can't say how many times in India, in one city or another, big *and* small, the power has gone out. It's a way of life in India. Sometimes, I assume, it's unexpected, accidental, a minor, temporary crisis, while other times, I'm sure, it's intended, either to clear the load or shift it. But how can I be taken aback by a near everyday incident in a "developing" country while the state of California, in my own superpower country, is having a power shortage of catastrophic dimensions?

Power's back and now God can be sung full blast.

We arrived day before yesterday, earlier than we had expected. So I decided to go to the yoga lecture session with Fran at the ashram, which is just up on the hill above us. The instructor, Upendra Nath Senepati, once someone put a worthwhile question to him, gave us the rundown on how to prepare to meditate, then dove into the subject of achieving the state known as "super-consciousness," which, of course, stirred me to ask what I consider to be inevitable questions: Are deadly bacteria and nuclear warheads a part of super-consciousness?" This led Mr. Senepati to expound on how, in this state, one tends to look down upon the world as if it were a great drama and smile as, again, in this state, there are no dualities such as good, bad, right, or wrong—no dualities. I suggested, then, that super-consciousness, that is, what I call universal mind, which one hopes to attain through meditation,

is amoral. He had to agree. His lecture and responses were a review for me and a pleasant affirmation. I was having fun and threw out my final question, the Zen koan that asks, "What do you do when you reach the top of a hundred foot pole?" After I got Mr. Senepati's name and he had left, a slender, blonde-haired Danish guy named Karel came up to me and asked me what the answer to the koan is, upon which I gave him my spiel, my commentary, though an answer, as it were, I did not give.

***Cloud of Bugs***

*Above my head a cloud of bugs*
*attracted to the balcony light....*

*Where do they fly*
*when the sun shines?*

*Or is light only so attractive*
*in the darkness of night?*

**February 23, 2001.** You ask me how I can be so proud, so vain, so arrogant as to say I can see through to reality and not see God. But I tell you I am not at all proud, not vain, in this vision—though arrogant, perhaps, but only when I attempt to share this vision with you.

The poet is an engineer. She builds a poem on the foundation of the first line—or on the last, depending on her orientation. The consonants are struts and beams, the vowels the walls. And the white space, the line and stanza breaks, the windows and doors....

## February 24, 2001

***Squeaky Wheel***

*The squeaky wheel*
*of the vegetable cart*
*makes a little music,*
*plays an unassuming tune.*

*(There is no grease.)*

*Deep beneath*
*the racket of town*
*the wheel sings*
*a tiny song,*

*a miniature flute*
*carved out by*
*the regular journey*
*between field and town.*

*A tiny melody,*
*devastatingly shrill,*
*that no one hears now*
*but the seller and I.*

By the time the second full morning rolled around, I was ready to give the morning yoga session a try. Fran said that while the evening session is strict and tough, the morning teacher is quite approachable. Interestingly, the teacher, Ragendira, teaches in ways that remind me of Fran's style: moves students through a series of poses toward a more difficult pose, returns to relaxing positions, controls his speech and tone for soft and

reassuring effect, and has an overall arc in progression from relaxed and easy to tense and difficult and back to relaxed again. His approach varies from Fran's in that he demonstrates poses up front, on a raised palette, and doesn't touch students to adjust them, though he walks around to check and make his presence felt. Turns out that Ragendira won the yoga competition here in Rishikesh—if one can imagine a yoga competition. I've gotten further involved in yoga on this India journey than I thought I would, doing one lecture and one yoga session so far. And of course, I've visited other ashrams with Fran and shared in learning about several swamis.

That same morning, after breakfast, Fran and I wandered down to look at the Ved Niketan Yoga Ashram, the one Laura recommended Fran attend here in Rishikesh. Once we saw it, read the program, observed a younger generation of people in tie-dyes sleeping on floors and in corners, she was glad she was instead practicing at the Yoga Niketan Ashram, with which our guesthouse is affiliated. From the Ved Niketan Ashram, then, we wandered down to the river's edge, to an informal-looking bathing ghat—little more than a set of steps leading down to the rocky riverbed, then, from there, a rock-lined path leading to the Ganga herself. There we sat while I perched on a rock in the water with my shoes and socks off and feet submerged, my one and only meager dip, so far, in the great sacred waters of the holy Ganges. Meanwhile, a family directly across the river from us had just lit a pyre upon which lay the corpse of a family member amidst flames. For about two hours we watched them gathered there, watched the beloved mother or father figure slowly consumed and eventually falling into the river as ash as the heap slowly sank and the flames subsided. Occasionally, some one of the group took a long stick and

gave the heap a poke, pushing a limb back in that had escaped the fire, or touching the skull, as required, and throwing the stick over the pyre into the river and yelling the name of the deceased to release the soul into the ether. While all this was going on, some kids had gathered to interact with Fran on shore and a young man sat close to narrate the cremation for us (Indians often come around, uninvited, to inform us of this or that, sometimes enlightening us, sometimes not). Turned out this young man was an ayurvedic doctor who had just graduated from medical school. And it just so happened that we'd purchased a couple products at an ayurvedic pharmacy only minutes before. We asked him all sorts of questions about the medicine I was taking and about ayurvedic medicine in general. Nice guy. I took notes. He suggests I'm 60 percent pita and 40 percent kapha (body and energy types in Indian medicine) as opposed to half and half, as the test I took in the States suggested. The medicine I'm trying is supposed to cure me of a minor psoriasis outbreak on my elbows. We'll see. I'm a strange blend of skeptical and hopeful when it comes to "alternative" medicine, a bit more of the former than the latter, I'm afraid.

We managed to make contact with Anita's father, Mr. Saini, in Saharanpur. He and his accountant, Mr. Agarwal, came yesterday to pick us up and take us up the road apiece to where Mr. Saini's manufacturing company had installed a water-driven, electricity-producing turbine, as well as a manufactured steel waterwheel for driving the already extant grain millstone. His purpose was to check on the installation, how the turbine was working, how it was being made use of, and how these folks, who had—via a grant—received the installation, felt about its

usefulness. Upon our arrival, Mr. Saini immediately noticed that several houses had sprung up nearby and that this particular little watershed was looking particularly green and prosperous. He showed us the installation, explaining everything about it in very concise, clear, and interesting language, bringing in the political and environmental angles as well. While the son of the shop in which it was installed seemed quite comfortable with and pleased by this conceptually and mechanically progressive device, the father seemed a bit unconvinced of its benefits. He wondered why the state hadn't removed the power lines and poles running along the road by his shop, to which many homes and businesses were still hooked up. But the son told us that they now have no electric bills and that they can grind four times as much grain in a given period of time. The visit was an insightful experience, real hands-on stuff for me, as it brought in so many related matters. It was also a good way to get to know Anita's dad and what he does.

Mr. Saini is a rather sturdy man, solid on his feet, in all respects, open-eyed, open-minded, worldly, articulate, interested, and generous. It was a privilege to meet him. Anita must be very proud to have such a dynamic and worthy father. His accountant friend, Mr. Agarwal, is a very gentle-hearted soul, who seemed to enjoy the journey although, because as a vegetarian he's overweight (vegetarians can eat the clarified butter ghee), he huffed and puffed to keep up with us as we walked here and there.

Once we finished with the turbine, Mr. Saini drove us to the Himalayan Institute, in Jolly Grant, which includes a hospital for the poor, a cancer research center, a medical college, and facilities for achieving and maintaining spiritual and physical health. The institute was founded by the late great Swami Rama.

When we arrived in Jolly Grant, we found that the road either side of the institute's drive was blocked by medical student barricades, as a sort of strike or statement. Best as I could gather, there'd been an incident between some students and some villagers over a glass of orange juice, resulting in a cracked skull and some smashed hands—of students—and the students wanted to see justice—that is, to see the responsible party or parties arrested.

Mr. Saini parked at a nearby motel, from whence we walked in to the hospital, where we met Dr. Sunil Saini, Mr. Saini's nephew and Anita's cousin (whom Anita had never met), who, it seems, because Mr. Saini had called ahead, was much more prepared for our visit than we might have guessed. He took us to his home, "on campus," and there we were served a lovely lunch, over which we discussed cancer and related subjects (Dr. Saini is a cancer surgeon). As the doctor had to conduct a class soon after lunch, he took us to the meditation hall, which was once upon a time Swami Rama's residence, from whence we could also visit the adjacent video library, where we viewed a film about the Swami and met an Indian-Curacaoan woman named Shalani. Then we saw the nearby healing center where Shalani was to go for a one-week purge and to the also-adjacent photo gallery featuring none other than Swami Rama. I'm really taken by this Swami Rama.

Mr. Saini and Mr. Agarwal dropped us off in front of our guesthouse by six. We exchanged info, and they were off. What a day! Very enlightening and fulfilling. It would be a pleasure to meet Mr. Saini again. I hope he'll visit us in Washington.

But to keep to the main events today, Fran and I began walking along the sandy beach north of the footbridge, on the

Lakshman Jhula side, toward Lakshman Jhula itself. Soon we met our Israeli friends Judith and Rimone, who joined us in the hike through, around, and over the ever-increasingly bouldery riverbank till the way beside the riverbank was impassable and we clambered up on the forested flat above.

Right away we came upon yet another ashram-hotel construction underway, where Rimone and I took it upon ourselves to inspect the construction process. It never ceases to amaze me how Indian builders raise rebar-enforced concrete stanchions, then, with hundreds of temporary wood supports, lay a concrete floor on top of them and so on upward to second, third, and sometimes fourth floors. It's like setting up pegs on a floor, then laying a heavy board on them, setting up more pegs on top of that board, then laying on another heavy board on top of those pegs, and so on up. No wonder the earthquake in Gujarat brought down almost all the buildings and so many folks died! Of course, the walls do help to reinforce the structure a little, but the walls are also made of concrete and are tremendously heavy. There's no tensile strength. Yet we've been sleeping in such precariously ponderous structures since we arrived in India!

Once the four of us arrived in Lakshman Jhula, Fran and I continued on alone toward the oft-mentioned waterfall, which we never reached, as it turned out to be too far. Then we backtracked, crossed the Lakshman Jhula Bridge, and found the Lakshman Temple, where I allowed the pseudo-priest to bless me and, for a seemingly required donation, to place about my neck a wooden bead necklace, like a mala. It was hokey, but I wanted to experience the "sensation" before we left India.

In Ramjhula, Fran had her palm read—on a lark, of course. The palm reader was set up in a recess in the wall of an imposing

but gaudy pink and orange ashram. He had a limited vocabulary in English but managed to get across to Fran that 35 percent of her life would be difficult and 65 percent would be no problem. He then translated that as meaning that, for the first 35 years of her life, she'd have some problems, then after 35 wouldn't have any. Of course, it didn't help that our palm reader thought Fran was only 24, which was the age he guessed when she asked, suggesting that Fran was yet to experience eleven more years of problems. Little did he know that she was nearly 40 and, it goes without saying, long since totally free of problems.

**February 25, 2001.** This is the look of suffering glazed over by the look of acceptance. The weight of nothingness buoyed by the prospect of somethingness. I walk speedily along the manmade road, with water, toilet paper, and soap in a plastic bag, a member of the class in motion, at home and abroad. Meanwhile, a man loses his color as he squats by the side of the road, slowly gaining a strange visibility and the suck of an unspoken rhetoric.

Yesterday, once we'd finished with our quick visit to Lakshman temple, we walked back across the Lakshman Jhula Bridge, then south along the shady lane that links Lakshman Jhula with Swargashram, where we tried to get close-up photos of the—new to us—redheaded, golden-tailed green parakeets that chirp and flutter here and there nipping yellow blossoms from a certain prevalent shrub alongside the road. We remarked on the tiny brick and concrete houses set back in amongst the trees, many rather nicely groomed and painted, as if for pilgrims and aspirants to rent and meditate, with easy access to the more secluded stretches of the River Ganga.

But our ultimate destination was farther south, back through Swargashram again, to seek out the ashram of Maharishi Mahesh Swami—of Beatles fame. As we were flailing about looking for this seemingly elusive place, we came upon a row of tiny caves scraped out of a low sandstone bank just above and overlooking the river, where apparently sadhus, pilgrims, ascetics, aspirants, and the like can dwell beside the holy waters. I took a picture of one in which there was a mat and cloth on sand for a bed and a rounded stone for a pillow and nothing else. Also, there was an eerie group of neo-hippie-looking Europeans sitting around in a group, who began to chant "Shiva, Shiva" when we approached to ask about the Maharishi's ashram. They were clearly living in a dualistic world.

***Tiny Ascetic Cave***

*Beside the River Ganga*
*I come upon a tiny cave,*
*with floor of sand,*
*woven mat for bed,*
*and rounded stone for pillow,*
*with light from the setting sun*
*glowing red within.*

*The river glints and gabbles*
*just beyond its mouth.*
*The falling light intensifies*
*the saffron tones of Rishikesh*
*as chant from a nearby ashram*
*crackles ecstatically.*

*Endless human ashes*
*from ghats upstream,*

*snuffed by the all-*
*embracing waters,*
*sweep by like silt*
*to occupy the mind.*

*A million miles in spirit*
*from the maddening roar*
*of the materialistic world!*

*I take a photo*
*to look at later:*
*tiny ascetic cave,*
*momentarily unoccupied,*
*a long invisible finger*
*beckoning me*
*to come inside.*

Finally, we found the ashram, beyond and up a hill above some rundown out-of-the-way residences where a major monkey war was going on—and where I picked up a throwing-rock just in case—and we ascended to the all-the-more-eerie abandoned ashram, with its stone-imbedded, retro-sci-fi, dome-shaped meditation huts and looming shadows of a once luminous past.

We came upon a small group of people near a cluster of larger buildings, where we met an attendant who told us something about the state of the ashram and showed us around. It turns out the ashram operated, in its heyday, from 1965 to 1985, after which, at some point, the Swami migrated to Holland, where he resides today. The place has since fallen into disrepair, but now, apparently, there's a plan to rebuild it. But when the work will begin, when the ashram will reopen, and whether the Swami

will return, remains a mystery or is yet to be determined. The attendant took us to the original reception office, where there were charts on the wall linking Transcendental Meditation with science, as modern gurus have felt it their duty to do, and glorious touched-up photos of the Swami as if elevated in some earthly heaven of gold and light, a picture I think I remember seeing inside a Beatles album cover. I remember clearly when Transcendental Meditation was popular and the Beatles were playing Indian instruments. Sometimes I imagine buying the collected works of the Beatles so I might relive those cultural events that I have this creeping feeling I missed for having been swept up in other events or living in other worlds.

This morning we got to know the folks who run the little café where we started having breakfast as of yesterday. Om Prakesh, the father, is very religious—he was distracted till he completed his prayers—and is very humble. We helped his youngest son study his workbook for a while at our table, then escorted his oldest son, Nikel, to an Internet café to introduce him to the Internet, because he loves computers and wants to become a computer engineer. On a computer we rented, we directed him to our website, where he seemed to enjoy my poems, to a Seattle sights website, a couple Rishikesh sites, a volleyball site, then to a World War II site, just to show him how he can pursue his interests and needs via that medium. We also explained that he can look for scholarships and educational and professional opportunities on the net. I took a picture of Fran helping him at the keyboard.

This afternoon we have a date to meet Mr. Bisht's teacher-daughter at one. Fran is going to conduct a small class for our

Hong Kong neighbor CiCi at four, and we also have a date for dinner with our Israeli friends at seven. There's so much to do! One could almost get too busy when footloose and fancy free, if one isn't careful.

Now, as I lie on the bed with the balcony door thrown open, the pink light of five in the afternoon turns the river from silver to blue. Signs and buildings, the makeshift ferry boats that putter back and forth between Ramjhula and Swargashram, robes of tourists and pilgrims alike—grow palpable and warm in color against the deepening blue of evening. Stone collectors drive their tractors, trailers, and trucks out over the dry riverbed and into the shallows for one last load. Cormorants, as always, hold station on the big rocks out in the deeper, swifter middle of the river. One snowy egret takes off; another lands. I wonder what colors I bring from the strange world of North America to these surfaces by contrast, what intensity, solidity, and warmth I experience here by contrast with the cool blues and greens of the Northwest. I wonder, of course, but am satisfied to lap up these five-in-the-afternoon colors in my mind, which somehow seems the opposite of a painter's brush: I make a stroke and the brush—my mind's eye—soaks up the colors of Rishikesh—colors that would set anyone at ease.

Yes, I'm an outsider here in India (even, to some degree, in my own country), but as a Universalist, I'm never wholly alien, no matter where I go, though I may feel strange looking out of a bathyscaph seven miles down in the Marianas, or out of a lion's maw through the bars of its fangs, should I manage to arrive in such a place—or even in the village of an undiscovered tribe in Borneo, about to eat a squirming five-inch grub. So I suppose outside and inside are relative. And I don't want to make any

too-quick claims about how at home I'd feel on Mars. I've been inhabited by alien species in the past, and I certainly did my best to give those protozoa, those worms, a taste of human hell. And I hate to think I might be thought of somewhere as bacteria or as a flesh-eating parasite. *Then* I'd know something like an absolute in the realm of relativity!

I saw a bird. With copper head and crest, starched white bib, and turquoise wings and tail. I swear to you here at home I saw this bird—that such a bird does exist. How can I expect you to believe? That when it flew it lit up the sky around me, cut a permanent swath of color across my retina and memory that I couldn't erase if I wanted to. Excuse me if I've returned to you a little crazy, for I've seen a bird whose head and crest are as coppery as a newly minted American penny, a breast as white as the most benign cloud, and wings and tail cut from the sapphire of another planet.

As I sit on our tiny hotel balcony, as I watch the world of Rishikesh wind up with light and chant and now wind down again with the deep shadow of night, watch the ferry putter back and forth between Ramjhula and Swargashram, watch the rock collectors fill their trucks out on the river bed, watch the tourists, the pilgrims, the aspirants, the sadhus, and the ascetics pass right and left this side of the river and that, watch the hotel employees water the garden, serve tea and coffee, and maintain the hotel grounds and surfaces, I don't tell a soul, not even my wife, that what I love most to watch is the aviary, the bird sanctuary that is the riverbed just below the hotel. Kingfishers of dazzling colors and wondrous expertise at stocking and diving the shallows for small fish, ouzels and

dippers of various shapes and colors bobbing on rocks till they too dive abruptly for a meal, snowy egrets and lesser herons, ochre-colored ducks, ospreys and fish eagles, gulls and crows—all keep me alert at my post, keep me entertained, keep my eyes sharp and my powers of discrimination alive. The human world is a lovely complicated mess, but the world of birds, after so many days, so many years, of watching our human folly, begins to make so much more sense. Watching them live one with their world and not by praying to their own wishful imagination, I find my one true self. The lovely flight and song of bird is a majesty high and above the stumbling and racket that are the vain aspirations of humankind.

***Sourpuss***

*It's as if at all times*
*he's just eaten a lemon.*
*His mind is like a house*
*with no windows or doors.*

*I turn up the corners*
*of my mouth at him*
*with laughing eyes,*

*I tell him that if his manager*
*were a Zen master,*
*he'd tweak his nose.*

*And still his mouth*
*is drenched in lemon—*
*here in the Land*
*of Enlightenment!*

**February 26, 2001.** So indeed, we did meet the daughter of our favorite Yoga Niketan Hotel desk clerk Mr. Bisht. Her name is Renuka, and she's a high school teacher here in Rishikesh fresh out of the fold of her Masters of English program. What a nice girl, always smiling! She really takes after her father, both in looks and manner. We bombarded her with questions about education and being a young unmarried woman till I think she felt drained and she asked us to tell her something about our lives. I think she was particularly interested in hearing from Fran, an older, more established American woman with a progressive lifestyle.

In the midst of our conversation in our room with Renuka, CiCi showed up saying there would be photos down in the garden. Several of us travelers and several hotel employees grouped up for shots by her and me. In the middle of the shot, sitting grandly in the middle of the group, as if this photo were all about him, was a man I'd never seen before. I asked, as I held up my camera, "Who is this gentleman I've never met before, sitting in the middle of my photo?" Not that I didn't want him there but that I wanted to be able to say who he is, later, when I referred to the photo. It turned out he's a friend of Mr. Bisht, an Indian-derived fellow originally from Surinam, who's now a Hindu priest at the Yoga Niketan Ashram in Holland. I tell you, the world is a swirl of colors and origins, religions and ethnicities. Anyone from anywhere might come to Rishikesh.

Judith and Rimone, the Israeli couple, after some delays, showed up for our dinner date last night. We had a delightful repast at Chotiwallas, where we heard their story about a man who drove them to Rishikesh, seemingly out of the generosity of his heart, who it seems had a girlfriend in

Rishikesh (while being married), whom they also met and who seemed to connect in some meaningful way with Judith. She gave a note to Judith upon her departure with the man, which Judith had translated later. To paraphrase, it said that she had no parents, no family, felt as if Judith were her mother and wanted her to take her back to Israel with her. Then she left. Judith assumed that was the last she would see of her, but just as we arrived back at the lobby of our guesthouse, in pops this woman, who attached herself to Judith's neck like a long lost daughter, pulling her back out to the car she'd been waiting in out on the road. I couldn't see her face; there was no chance. In fact, she may have been hiding her face. And now she was with another man. It turns out she's a prostitute. They want to drive Judith and Rimone down to Delhi, where they were to go anyway the next morning. She was also looking for an answer to her note. Judith felt amidst a horrible dilemma. Of course, they could appreciate the personalized free ride to Delhi, but obviously there were strings attached. This woman didn't know Judith; and Judith didn't know where this woman was coming from. Finally, Judith, after much hemming and hawing and some honest tears, sent them on their way. I told her she'd done the right thing.

Now is the hour of the lengthening shadow and color-deepening light. We're about to depart the Yoga Niketan Guest House, Ram Jhula, Rishikesh, and Uttar Pradesh, for Varanasi. Much as I would have loved to linger timelessly in Pushkar, so my body, my eyes, cling to this also magical Rishikesh and the upper Ganga River. For so many, the gods, salvation, and enlightenment are real, and this is what gives this place its energy, colors its light, enlivens its air with music. To this add

the goats, the pigs, the cows, the pariah dogs (including the sweet Julie, the hotel mascot, who had more love in her than almost any human being I've met on this journey, except Mr. Bisht), the various birds and the monstrous carp below the footbridge, and we have "civilization" and nature merging despite themselves, creating a world that isn't likely replicated anywhere in the universe. I have felt more enlightenment, pleasure, and peace sitting out on our little balcony over the paradise garden and the white sandy beach, the rocky riverbed, and the ever-flowing silver to green-blue Ganga River, than perhaps anywhere else on this adventure. I know I can't expect to experience such tranquility in Varanasi—and I know what to expect in Kolkata and Bangkok once we turn back toward home.

All in all, our visit to Rishikesh has served to reaffirm my perceptions of the world, our need to have faith in self and humankind, as well as the value I put in finding a spiritual connection in Nature. My mission when we return will be to get involved in a Keep Ganga Clean campaign, as the image of a woman pouring her rose petals, as per custom, into the River, then tossing along with them the plastic bag they came in, sticks in my brain like a thorn. No healthy spirituality or religion can transcend and thereby ignore the planet we live on, the rivers we bathe in and drink from, the earth we grow our food in and let our animals graze and children play on, not to mention the air we breathe and through which we peer and hopefully see. That the River shall outlive us, no matter how long we survive on Earth, may seem like a reason not to bother with preserving it, but it's makes even a better reason to preserve it. It's a simple conscious choice of good, better, and best as opposed to bad,

worse, and worst. Seeing and choosing. Spirituality that does not see is a fog of ignorance and delusion—often a filthy one.

I would also collect more knowledge of Hindu religion and mythology and contemporary yoga and meditation—and language that describes all this, in order to write about my "river of faith." The faith I have in the river refers to paradise here and now on Earth, while faith that most of the aspirants and devotees to the river here have, is one that refers to a paradise in another world, in another time and place. Hope may well be a danger to vision, faith a deterrent to action.

In my estimation, the finest human being, the most enlightened soul, the gentlest, most gracious creature we met in India has been Mr. B. S. Bisht, manager of the Yoga Niketan Guest House, where we stayed in Rishikesh. As he signed us in, had me filling out the usual necessary registration forms, I sensed a single-minded character of unusual tonal qualities, who went about his business as if it mattered, more than for mere bureaucracy. Occasionally, I caught a hint of a smile amidst all his focus and seriousness, and soon, after we'd warmed him up to our own distinct human qualities, he was sharing his giggle-chuckle-laugh and even hugging me—which, of course, he could do because I'm a man; I'm more physically accessible to an Indian man than a woman, that is, than Fran. At first, during our stay there, he worked on us to join a tour farther up into the mountains to Gangotree and other such spiritual outposts and temples. But when he came to realize that we were delighted merely to stick close to Rishikesh, where we'd only just arrived, he gave up the soft sell. Especially once he invited Fran and me into the night manager's sleeping room behind the desk and I expressed my rather extreme existential views and directed

a few Zen pokes at the sour-faced, unrelated, other Mr. Bisht who managed the desk sometimes—our own Mr. Bisht really warmed up and went out of his Buddha-like way to see that our needs were met. At his bidding, we went next door to watch, listen to, and join in a musical event on Shiva's holiday, where a small band had gathered and a singer and master of ceremonies prevailed. I think Mr. Bisht wanted to know that we were enjoying ourselves, that he had provided every opportunity for cultural and spiritual experience, and that we were comfortable at the guesthouse. I felt this particularly, as our six days in Rishikesh were growing short, when I asked him about how I might easily and quickly change money. Suddenly I found myself riding behind him on his scooter as he dodged cows, goats, and lorries on the road into town (no foot pedal on the left side, so I had to hold my leg up), as abruptly found myself sitting in front of the appropriate bank employee receiving my rupees, and again as abruptly having copies of my journal made across the street, then on the scooter again, scooting back to the guesthouse. Wordlessly. Seeking no thanks or recognition. Just to serve, to be there, to commit the highest act. I felt this about Mr. Bisht about as much as I've felt it about anyone I've ever met—a minor, but for me a major, saint.

The finale, once we convinced him that we didn't want to take a taxi all the way to Haridwar, was when we were getting ready to catch whatever Tempo came along to Rishikesh proper, he quickly picked up the phone and before we knew it, a man pulled up in the guesthouse taxi, he ushered us in and climbed in after us, to accompany us to the bus station and to see us off. Somehow we'd made an impression on him, touched him deeply with our own particular tonal qualities. The taxi driver sped along through the crowded streets as

Mr. Bisht nodded and gestured till our car turned abruptly into the bus yard. I immediately noticed a bent up, burnt-out bus and noted it to Mr. Bisht. It was growing dark. Some places get a little scary when it gets dark, and this walled-in compound was a perfect example. He told us that someone had placed a bomb in the engine compartment of the bus, but that it blew up before anyone had boarded. Nobody, by some miracle, had been hurt. He said these bombs go off, sometimes on buses, every two or three months. What a thought! What a threat to have to live with! And for what, I'm not sure and didn't ask. Political deviltry? Religious fundamentalism? Insanity? Hatred of humanity? Hatred of self? There the wreck reared up its bent-back skeleton like an exploded trick cigar, its skin blown away, front seats shredded free of their plastic covers, burnt surfaces turning to rust already. No better place for a bus carcass than the very spot where it blew up or tumbled over a cliff. Mr. Bisht, I think, wanted to hold our hands as he escorted us onto our bus and into our seats, as the few lights in the yard glared and all else fell into impenetrable darkness. We hugged, all of us in our turn this time, Mr. Bisht's sad eyes filled with moisture, and I knew I'd met someone who would loom larger in my memory as time passed and that I'd seek this man out again in our beloved Rishikesh. Then he turned to go, and the darkness, like silence, fell upon my senses, an uninvited shroud of inhuman outer space.

***The Blown-up Bus***

*The blown-up bus*
*set back in the yard,*
*left right where it blew,*
*looking like the skeleton*
*of a long-beached whale*

*was a little more reality*
*than we might have sought*
*at the local bus station.*
*Had me figuring our odds,*
*as I do when I board a flight,*
*just to come around a bit*
*to the inevitability*
*and unpredictability*
*of death. Again, like a whale,*
*beached, dead, bones bleached,*
*nothing left but the skeleton….*

*There's something*
*a little more comforting*
*in the whale metaphor.*

*And Mr. Bisht, telling the story*
*so matter-of-factly, adding*
*that such explosions happen*
*every couple months,*
*accompanying us to our seats,*
*showing us just how much*
*he was with us,*
*just how strong his faith was,*
*not that he would be protected*
*nor we along with him,*
*but that his time, and ours,*
*would come when it would.*

*Mr. Bisht and the blown-up bus,*
*a node in time and memory,*
*toward which all other memories*
*shall flow as toward a black hole.*

*The yard lights were blinding*
*in the growing darkness outside*
*the windows of our rickety*
*albeit intact bus.*

*Then again, we were as good*
*as anyone to die with.*

*These were huge thoughts*
*for a single firing*
*of a single synaptic circuit.*

# The Journey from Rishikesh to Varanasi (Banaras), Uttar Pradesh

Then, as if to test me, to roundabout bolster the perceptions and values I mention above, I am sent a lunatic to tell me—sitting next to me in the waiting room of the Haridwar train station—that the world will find its salvation through the fear of God and that the reason the U.S. is so successful is because its people fear God. I argued that there were many faithful, God-fearing folks in Gujarat who were crushed by the Republic Day earthquake, but his argument was that because there were some evil politicians in Gujarat everyone had to pay. So what about the hurricanes that kill honest, successful Americans, the Mississippi flood, the body-freezing blizzards that pour down out of the North? A maniac, I felt just then, this absolutist man was—more a test of my tolerance than my view. Some minds are like bear traps: snapped shut and forgotten in the woods—though I did indeed give this trap a fair listen.

***Kicking Out the Hallmark Words***

*It was another madman's idea*
*to throw out the word*
*Immortal, at which he was hit in the face by*
*Now. He thought also to toss out*
*God, and his own extraordinarily powerful fists*
*gave him a good thrashing about the face.*
*Surviving, but roughed up,*
*he kicked out*
*Soul and, rather than imploding,*
*exploded with*
*Mind. A tough act to follow,*
*but, gaining confidence now,*
*he inched out Heaven and Hell,*
*and his senses were buffeted*
*by the sights and sounds and smells*
*of the True Garden of Pure Earth all around him*
*which he had never noticed before,*
*at which he woke to the ecstasy of sunlight*
*and the excruciating but reassuring weight*
*of gravity, and His One Real Life.*
*And the great hallmark words,*
*all of which had begun with capital letters,*
*fell back to Earth,*
*every one in lower case,*
*where they once flew up.*

## February 27, 2001

***The River***

*The river,*
*always moving,*
*flowing,*
*passing on,*

*there,*
*right there*
*before the fixed*
*eye,*

*till the eye*
*begins to move,*
*to flow,*
*and the river*

*disappears….*

Heaven, in which we find ourselves despite ourselves, in which clouds are more solid than stone. In which every one of us can play the harp beautifully, never having learned to do so nor ever practiced. In which Bach no longer composes music while the largest organ in the universe resonates on a C-major chord eternally. In which there are no trees, no flowers, and especially no weeds. In which there are no cards, no card games, for there must be no winners and no losers. In which the body can feel no pleasure, for the body must feel no pain. In which there is no body. In which The Man makes his rounds and greets each and every soul individually, allotting a kiss, sometimes a hug, a tender handshake, no more than five seconds to each, but in

which there will be no time. In which thought is forbidden, being private and individualistic and dangerous to the peace. In which there is no sun, no moon, no stars, for it's a place above the material plane....

# Varanasi (Banaras), Uttar Pradesh

Two, Maybe Three, Views of the River Ganga (after Mark Twain): Maybe my imagination does the present (as I see Varanasi today, especially the ghats from our boat as the sun rises) an injustice. But here, after 21 years—and now that I have Fran with me, whom I was so anxious to have see the otherworldly buildings and long-worn stairways descending into the river and the devotees and fervent believers bathing—all the stripes and colors and splashing and activity, the rich green waters through which I watched a human thigh bone glide by like a slow-motion, ghost-inhabited missile those many years ago—such that when we headed out in the predawn gloom, drifting south along the ghats, outside the many small boats tied alongside, I didn't recognize anything I'd seen and photographed before. I assumed we were peering at a different stretch of ghats, that perhaps our oarsman took us this way to see the now burning pyres, smoldering as a fringe of light crowned the eastern horizon. Aside from a few relatively nondescript stupas, a Nepalese temple, and a man on a platform chanting and making a smoky puja to the river, the most

interesting image was that of the boatloads of seasoned banyan wood destined to cremate corpses. Stacks of it heaped up in boats coming from who knows what hard-hit forest, heaped up like the stupas and temples on shore and filling compounds and stalls, all invested in against the inevitability of death and the great hope of belief (not to mention the all-mighty rupee).

So, once we'd returned and had our breakfast, we trekked out on foot along the ghats to the north, and, at some point, I recognized perhaps two relatively magnificent buildings resembling those imprinted in my memory banks.

But my first time here I was filled with amazement at the sights and sounds, mesmerized by the architecture of the ages and the fervor of centuries of belief. Perhaps I'd seen so much more in 21 years than a visit to the most sacred place on Earth can shake up. I'd been taken by Pushkar, certainly, and by the relatively lovely, naturally beautiful Rishikesh; I was even romanticized by Kanyakumari—so I would like to think that Varanasi should still be able to pull the magic carpet out from beneath my jaded feet.

Or perhaps, as I tend to believe, the ghats have simply gotten too messy with trash, new structure build-up, with a lack of maintenance and with wires strung every which way. I stated such to a fellow who came up to talk to us (as usual), and he told us that the government has recognized the problem and will not issue any more building permits along the ghats.

I see a lot of stupas and temples protruding from between or atop buildings, even buried altogether by "growth." Humankind crunching in to get close to the believed-in waters. Homes on top of homes, businesses, small shops, opportunists, rabble, sliding into the mud of faith as the temples topple and sink and more houses sprout out of others.

What is buried here? How many relics and bones have sunk and been built upon? If only archaeology could tell us about the failures of the spirit! If we didn't die, if buildings and shrines didn't crumble, would there be any need for the spirit, for religion?

I ask too many calculating, insinuating, tough questions. I'm a rhetorician of reality and reason (funny the commonality of the first three letters in the words "reality" and "reason"). And therein, perhaps, lies a third possibility. It's not so much that I've seen too much at this point, but that perhaps I've become too "rational," seen—in my own mind—too deeply into the human psyche, seen clearly how badly people need to believe, how every religion, every culture, every society, sect, and individual, believes in something—at least slightly, if not grossly—different. I've concluded that the only thing that isn't relative, but absolute, is reality, the eternal now itself, changing every passing split second (to arbitrarily choose an increment of time). In fact, if there weren't two, let alone six billion different human minds, six billion different points of view, the world would be absolute, much as it is for animals, and there would be no "relative."

Now I know why existentialism, in my late twenties, and Zen, in my mid-forties, appealed so much to me. Existentialism was the first big step in my breaking through the self-protective bubble of the human mind, and Zen is a way to exist comfortably outside that bubble. Fortunately, the latter, alongside the Platonic value put on the "good," is a satisfying answer to the rather bleak (for all but a few, I think) former view.

So why am I hard put to get too fascinated with all these Hindu gods and mythological figures? Why do I feel irritated more often than not with all these beliefs? Why am I so critical

toward the "river of faith"? Because I see religion—and a lot of so-called "spirituality"—as nothing more than institutionalized superstition, all of which—or most of which—seduces us to keep our eye on the wrong ball, to believe in other than ourselves and in a place other than here.

Fortunately, there are systems, including science, that teach us to look at ourselves, to look inward, and even to move back into the material world and work with real-life problems here on Earth, now. According to this view, then, there isn't a lot of difference between the purposes and techniques of Western psychoanalysis and Eastern meditation: to observe, to analyze, to embrace or reject, to move on—to get to work.

But it's not as if I don't believe religion and religious ritual have their place. To watch and understand the Hindu cremation ritual is to come to see how the near-to-dying are reassured that they will be redeemed in another life and can let go of this one and to see also how loved ones, frequently sons and daughters and grandchildren, can say a well-defined farewell and formally sever their corporeal ties to the deceased.

Here we slowly ascend into night amidst out first and only sunset in old Benares and the first image Fran catches is that of a black kite flitting this way and that above the building tops, as if without a hand at the other end. For me it's the little monkey who, like a little man, regularly climbs up and down the outside of the building to stop on the rail of the rooftop restaurant to see if there are any thieving opportunities. There being few, and what with the waiter with the keen eye and sharp tongue, the little monkey-man climbs more monkey-like than man-like up onto the rooftop, out of sight. The world is more about a coarse meanness than a whole lot of well-intentioned

finery, anyway. Here we have a city that was the victim of regular Moghul demolition and compulsive reconstruction, singing and bickering, smoking and soaking and splashing. An old man with his stick sits with his back to the Ganges as if he is by no means ready to face the fire nor the water, and three kids play labyrinth on the strangely connected and disconnected rooftops, as if in an Escher print—but alive, alive, with movement! There are only three trees in sight that have survived the onslaught of bricks and concrete and stolen cremations. The last image makes me think the oarsman paddles about, wanting to stroke for the opposite shore, as a boat and oarsman are made to do, but continues to resist the impulse, as there's some small chance he could die on the wrong side of the river and be reborn as a donkey. It's funny—Fran and I agree, having lived so many years together—that to be born a jackass couldn't be any worse than being born the victim of one's claustrophobic beliefs. (The preceding was an exercise in which I had to utilize ten phrases listed by Fran.)

**February 28, 2001.** Fran and I, dissatisfied with our dawn boat ride ghat tour, drifted north along the bathing ghats, having the usual gamut of experiences—the hellos, the what's-your-countrys, the touts and their boat-ride pitches, the cows and cow dung, the goats and goat dung, the dogs and dog shit, the men and men's piss, all of it steaming in the sun. When we got back to Manikarnika Ghat, not far from our guest house, we climbed the steps up onto what appeared to be an elevated corral occupied by enormous cows and even more enormous bulls, which we learned later was actually a ghat used for cremating VIPs—politicians, movie stars, and rich people. From this platform we could observe the common burning

ghat below, where several cremations were underway, in various stages of the ritual. As we were watching family members and attendants remove garlands and golden cloth from the corpse of a loved one, a little girl ran up beside us with a near to bursting water balloon in hand, who spotted her target and dropped her bomb mischievously on the head of a bereaved husband (or son) below and dashed off, leaving us looking like the culprits, as the bereaved and solace-givers looked up at us in astonishment. We were trying to use hand gestures and a few simple words in English to exonerate us of guilt, to say that the little girl was the culpable party, when a smallish, white-whiskered character on the official viewing platform nearby took it upon himself to explain away, in Hindi, our guilt. Soon, he was standing beside us, explaining the cremation ritual in detail. Fran moved away, saying she couldn't watch the actual ritual for all the talk, so Ram, as his name was, continued his narrative with me.

According to Ram, the family wraps the corpse of a male figure in white cloth and that of a female in red. Relatives make a last offering of golden cloths and blood red garlands, which they also wrap around or place on the corpse. Several men bear the stiff body on their shoulders in a small entourage down through the colorful but shadowy alleys of Varanasi to the ghat, chanting as they go. They dip the body in the Holy River, place it on several thick support-logs, and then remove the garlands and cloths, as the body won't burn readily, wrapped in so many layers. The attendants stack wood on top of the corpse; then the closest relative uses a shock of dry grass to light the fire. Once the fire gets going, family members pour various ingredients representing the five elements of the Universe over the corpse: earth, water, fire, air, and ether. At some point in the ritual, a family member touches the head to "say hello," as

Sri Ram, put it. It takes about three hours to cremate a body. When all that remains of the body is bones and ash, the chest bone, in the case of a man, and the hipbone, in the case of a woman, are extracted from the fire and thrown into the river. Then relatives turn away and throw a pot of Holy River water over their shoulder to symbolically put out the fire and to sever their relationship with the deceased. Women, says Ram, are not allowed to participate in the cremation ritual, because, it seems, "they will cry," as he puts it. The son or husband or father, who has shaved his head, must continue to keep his head shaved and fast for two weeks following the cremation. Immediate family have other obligations as well, till some point after the ritual, at which time they are free—and expected—to move forward with their lives. Unfortunately, men seem to be afforded the catharsis of this process while women are not. But at least wives don't have to throw themselves on the raging pyres of their husbands as they once did. The British outlawed that little kink in the ceremony before they went back home.

What happened, of course, once Sri Ram finished telling me all about the cremation ritual, was that he wanted me to donate money to the cause of purchasing wood for burning the deceased of those families or individuals who can't afford the exorbitant cost of this no doubt ever-scarcer commodity, about 20,000 rupees, or 400 dollars, per pyre. Ever suckered in we are, especially me, by the con, good cause or bad, in the interest of getting closer to the culture! I gave him sixteen rupees, not sure I trusted the guy a hundred percent (it was obvious Fran didn't) or that I wanted to support the Indian system or custom of disposing of their dead. I certainly do not believe in reincarnation. Families should have to take care of their own if they want to have a dead family member cremated beside—and

thrown into—the sacred waters of the River Ganga in Varanasi, as opposed to the much cheaper alternative means available to them. Ram was not at all pleased with what he inferred was a paltry donation to the cause, so I succumbed and gave him ten more rupees. But I certainly was not going to give this man, for his story, hundreds of rupees. How could I possibly know where this money was really going? Besides, we didn't bring money to India to cover the needs of others; we have a budget that just gets us by. Fran, who had moved away when the man joined us, was stewing, for sure. I knew she didn't want me to give the guy a single rupee.

Last night, as planned, after we'd had a couple beers and played a couple games of cribbage up in the Shanti Guest House rooftop restaurant, we went to Rama "Korean" food restaurant for dinner and a little sitar and tabla concert. Beautiful room with ornate pastel ceiling, deity batiks all around, carpets and pillows to sit on at low wood tables, and a tiny Indian classical music stage in the corner. There was some question as to whether they would actually hold a concert this night, as we were the only takers there, up till concert time; but they decided to proceed, due, in part, I think, to the fact that I expressed how great an appreciator of classical Indian music I am. Anyway, a regular, an American from Seattle, by coincidence, who is a student of the tabla player, two interesting older guys from Belgium, and, lastly, a Basque guy, showed up all of a sudden, all of whom we ended up talking with, as well as with the Nepali owner and other musically inclined Indian kids. After having experienced Subramanian, the sitar player we heard in Kovalam, and his tabla player, it was interesting to evaluate the ability and styles of these younger, less experienced players. Actually, while the sitar player

wasn't much able to bend notes, slide, or improvise easily, that is, to create the landscapes and stories of Indian ragas, the tabla player was quite accomplished for such a young fellow and fun to watch, as he threw his whole body into the act. In fact, I'd have to say that the sitar accompanied the tabla more than the tabla accompanied or supported the sitar, as one generally expects. Still, it was an excellent, up-close event. We talked at length particularly with the two guys from Belgium, about travel, and about music with Eric, the guy from Seattle. He looked familiar, actually, said he hangs out in Seattle's University District. He's been studying tabla in Varanasi, also a famous music city, for five months, but otherwise seems to be putting off a degree in computer game programming.

As we were nearing our hotel, climbing the few stairs up the narrow alley, we passed, first I then Fran, an Indian guy of whom neither of us took much notice. Suddenly, Fran yelled out, "You bastard!" and I turned around just in time to see her slug the fellow in the shoulder. She continued to yell at him, "You don't do that!" She turned toward me and huffed that he had "violently grabbed at her body" as she passed him. I immediately strode over to him, grabbed him by the arms and pressed him violently up against a wall, then slapped him soundly upside the face. At first, he seemed to want to deny that he had done anything wrong, then saw that he'd been seen through and began apologizing. "Sorry, sir!" A shopkeeper arrived immediately to provide support. Fortunately, he had seen what had happened and didn't think I was just some foreign bully beating up a poor innocent Indian kid (who was taller than I). Then we stomped heatedly the rest of the way into the hotel and up to our room where our hearts were still beating and we were still riled up. I told Fran that I hate

hitting anybody but that I thought we had done exactly the right thing. I was glad I hadn't hit him with a closed fist. I was able to attenuate my anger in order to find the right balance of reaction and even punishment, on the one hand, and cultural sensitivity, on the other. After all, if I had beaten the guy up, I might have had an Indian mob on my back. Fran and I discussed how repressed Indian society is, how the men are exposed to suggestive images of women and sex but how, nevertheless, they can't go around groping any foreign woman they see. They need to see the line clearly. Hopefully, I clarified that line just right for our groper that night.

We saw the shopkeeper from last night as we were on our way back from viewing the ghats one last time. He told us that he called some buddies over and they beat our groper up too. He added that folks in this area can't afford to alienate tourists, since they depend so much on tourism to survive. The culprit was from another neighborhood. Hopefully, they didn't beat him up too bad, but just yelled him down good.

Though I'd traveled in India before, I still had to adjust my eyes again to the depressing color of filth lit by one or two streetlights at one in the morning. The Muslim man who came trundling up Sudder Street the night we arrived in India seemed both good and evil incarnate, sent to save us as if by some unknown god. White kaftan and skullcap and long black beard, with no mustache, he came straight out of the Koran and Kolkata's grubby streets, one hand to guide us, one to receive our rupees. I recall how lurid life on the sidewalks under a few streetlights looked, somewhere between a dim ochre and a glossy violet. Homeless people rolled up in blankets and extra clothing slept on sidewalks and a few others sat with knees

under chins around feeble fires. Worse than a nightmare—and that was our first night in India together.

And what do these poets and their poems do to me? Why, they make me forget my business, make me forego the facts. I return to my childhood to rebuild my forts, and this way I become a metaphor, some poor missive of love lost in a labyrinth of Nature's creation. I am hopeless in my aspiration, like a miner feverishly panning in the wilderness, forgetting the face of civilization, any memory of the way back, disinterested in worldly affairs or even in food or fire. I am buffeted by the billion worlds, the two billion eyes, the infinite hearts that know no religion or government or educational institution. I feel raw motionless bliss and the universe, and I thank the abandon of such minds to the mess that is language in which these poets in their poems splash as in wading pools or run their hands as through sand in sandboxes, in playgrounds of love and war, madness and clarity!

# The Roundabout Way Back to Kolkata, West Bengal

**March 1, 2001.** We left the Shanti Guest House at three in the afternoon, with an American from California named Josh in tow, because by coincidence we had reservations for the same train, the same car, to Kolkata. Nice white-complexioned, ruby-lipped (frequently applied chap stick), black-haired Jewish boy from Los Angeles full of energy, ideas, talk, and naïveté. Fran wasn't in a big hurry to have him along, but I rather liked him, and he grew on Fran. Besides, it was clear we were traveling the same path for a spell. We got settled in the waiting room at Varanasi station. When what we thought was our train pulled up, we located the A-1 car, jumped on, and got situated in our seats, which were unoccupied. We began talking about whether we had had any disasters in India. Josh had had disasters ever since he'd arrived in India, of one sort or another, and I was about to remark that our journey, from start to finish, had gone disasterless—very smoothly, in fact—when the conductor arrived to check our tickets and exclaimed that we'd gotten on the wrong train, that instead of heading toward Kolkata, we were now heading in the opposite direction, toward Delhi!

After much confusion, assertions, and remonstrances, the conductor determined that we should get off at the very next station, Jonpur, then catch the next train back to Varanasi and get straightened out there.

Sooner than we had been told, the train reached Jonpur and we were hurried by the conductor to jump off on the side of the train opposite the platform, down with the rails and crushed rock and rats, and to jump up on the local train two sets of tracks over—all very exciting, indeed, hefting our bags and stumbling and scrambling to find ourselves in the midst of further chaos on a second class car with people of lower caste and less wealth and heaps of bags and packages strewn here and there. We descended in our big, noisy American way on one unenclosed compartment where we spied a little space to sit. Fran sat below, beside a Muslim man with three little sons, and tried to communicate with him while Josh and I sat above, on the "rack," and brainstormed ideas and language for his travel magazine concept: Freedom Magazine for Global Adventure and Personal Independence (which I took the liberty to amend to Global and Local Adventure).

Back at the Varanasi station, we tried to explain to officials how we'd been told our train would be pulling in on platform five on time, which was indeed where and when we had jumped on what we thought was our train but also where and when we jumped on what turned out to be the wrong train. We were told we should just jump back on the train we had just gotten off, that there was a first class car we could up-grade to. We ran up and down alongside the train and never saw any but second-class sleepers and second-class regular cars. So when the train started to pull away, I yelled, "Let's get on! At least it's going to Kolkata!" Fran nearly fell between the car and the

platform and scraped her shin. I got on, but Josh shouted, "I'm not sure I'm getting on this one." But I encouraged him, and on he jumped, continuing his Indiana Jones adventure jumping trains with us.

We managed to settle into a compartment again, this time all on a lower seat but with our luggage spread here and there on distant but more or less visible racks. A man, a fine-looking gentleman, began to engage us in conversation, helping negotiate sitting space for us and recommending we move our luggage closer. Amidst all the commotion, a Punjabi woman had become abruptly infatuated with Fran and was hugging and adoring her and trying to offer us fruit from a bag. Then, as if our commotion amidst the chaotic comings and goings of boarding and disembarking passengers weren't enough, three military policemen arrived—on duty, according to our new friend Mr. Kaushik. One of them in particular seemed to want to engage us in an interaction. Soon, I was illustrating Fran's and my wedding by playing invisible violin and intoning loudly and passionately "Come Back to Sorrento" to have some fun and to ameliorate the head policeman's apparent aggressiveness and challenges, which I sensed easily enough through his uniform and commanding military presence. Lots of buddy-like handshaking and brotherly affiliation—all bullshit, really, I knew, but I was in control and having fun. Amidst all this subtle, or not so subtle male posturing, Fran decided to fib and told the policeman, via Mr. Kaushik's translation, that we had one son, to which Mr. Kaushik added two daughters, and suddenly Fran and I were parents, mother and father, winking, or at least blinking, at each other and enjoying the ruse. After our small brigade left for good (thankfully, as I was losing patience with the game), supposedly to keep an eye out for thieves on the

train, Mr. Kaushik confided that, yes, they were on duty but at least one of our buddies in arms had been drinking, because he smelled alcohol on someone's breath. But also, once they'd left, we learned, lo and behold, that Mr. Kaushik was from Saharanpur and knew Anita's dad, Mr. Saini, whom we'd met earlier on our journey, in Rishikesh. Once we'd gotten used to this astonishing coincidence, Fran remembered that she'd lied about our having children and whispered our dilemma to me. I told her I thought she should simply admit to Mr. Kaushik that it wasn't true, which before long she did. Caught in a lie! Certainly a great lesson for sticking to the truth!

Mr. Kaushik, brushing off our indiscretion with what seemed like only a twinge of disappointment and taking our train catastrophe to heart, recommended we get off in Moghul Serrai, a major junction where there would be lots of trains going on to Kolkata. The goodbyes were abrupt and quick; suddenly we were lying—including Josh—on Fran's yoga mat on platform number one, with our bags under our heads or legs or strewn about. Josh got it into his head to entertain himself with his devil sticks (two shorter sticks which one uses to twirl and throw a longer stick in the air), which before long attracted a lot of train station urchins and eventually a lot of other folks waiting for trains, railway employees, and vendors, who had set up shop nearby. Josh twirled and spun and tossed the colorful decorated stick upward, ever nearer the platform canopy, as all eyes rolled up then down and orbited in their sockets. The kids insisted he do it again and again—and then again. Soon they wanted to try it themselves. Unfortunately, the crowd didn't disperse right away, once Josh got tired, but hung about staring at us as if the sticks had given them permission. I lay upon my bags as if upon a recliner and stared back at the motley pack.

At some point it occurred to us that we should try to get new reservations for the train that was supposed to pull in at about midnight, so off we migrated to the distant ticketing office. After much crowding in and being crowded out at a window, a man appeared outside the office who put us all on the right track. Josh should catch a taxi back with the Brit we'd just met (who himself was nearing the end of his own train catastrophe) to Varanasi, where he could try to get some kind of a refund for his now useless ticket, and we should go back to the same platform and wait for the aforementioned train to Kolkata and present ourselves to the conductor, hoping he'll have a couple berths for us. Although we had to wait till well after one, that's what happened. As we boarded, found and tentatively claimed two apparently empty berths, Fran said, "This will be the real test of how great these Indrail passes are." Sure enough, when the conductor came around, he assigned us the berths we'd claimed, although, indeed, there was a little competition.

One of our competitors for a berth was Saajan Agarwal, cement company director, who seemed inordinately interested in having me sit with him a spell to talk—at nearly two in the morning on a sleeper car in which all other passengers were fast asleep. I excused myself till the next morning. Thus Fran and I did manage to get a good night's sleep after our train catastrophe, after feeling as if we'd been dragged through some kind of endless bureaucratic hell—fed up and ready to collapse—and even managed to sleep in and keep our curtains pulled till about ten in the morning. Once we'd swung our legs out to the floor, we were soon joined by Saajan Agarwal and another gentleman who was berthed across from us. The questions got going, the discussion warmed up, and the hidden agendas—of Saajan—began to reveal themselves.

More and more he tried to impress us with his possessions, employees, income, travels, hinting at experiences with women in Thailand, till finally he popped the subject. The "platonic" subject of swapping was interjected into the stream of cultural exchange, along with treatment of guns and the like. Meanwhile, the other man, an intense, green-eyed, ashen-faced fellow named Ravi, continued to respect propriety and listen and stay true to a simple agenda of keeping in touch. The interaction did, however, make for a fast and easy five hours, once the conversation began, till we pulled in to Howrah station. Still, I'd gotten sick of this Saajan fellow well before we arrived, and, although he clung to us as we disembarked, we shook him by ignoring him in the overwhelming cavern that is Howrah station. India is a real test of every categorical set of nerves in the body—those for dealing with insidious albeit seemingly innocent people, those for managing in chaos and confusion, and those for navigating in unknown realms, not to mention those for dealing with the onslaught of obviously needy hands and hungry mouths and horrifically diseased bodies that we now faced among the seething masses in Kolkata's most monstrous train station. I nearly wrenched my back out of joint dodging a man coming at me with open arms whose skin was completely covered in bubbles.

# Our Second Stay in Kolkata, West Bengal

**March 2, 2001.** We had decided to splurge on our last hotel in India, and soon we were happily ensconced in the famous, once infamous, Fairlawn Hotel, on Sudder Street, which we had checked out when we first arrived in Kolkata nine weeks prior. Such character one is not likely to experience in India. Originally built and used by opium traders nearly two hundred years ago, then run as a hotel for some time by two elderly British spinsters, it's now operated by an aging couple, also with British passports, who have preserved and built upon the colonial history of the place, adding personal memorabilia, awards, celebrity and royalty photos and artifacts to the walls as they've accumulated. He strikes me as particularly English and is apparently beginning to feel his age, as there's always a nurse about to tend to him. He still, however, keeps the books when he can. She is originally Armenian, her parents apparently having been murdered along with 10,000 other Armenians by the Turks in Dacca. This bit of history baffles me, as I've never heard of Turks in Dacca, which is in Bangladesh. The hotel has been so coated in layers of paint that much of the detail of the woodwork and wrought iron has

been generalized to rounded glossy shapes hardly resembling the original sculpting. Much of the place has been painted a sickly but somehow appropriate green, giving it a rather vegetable feel, to accompany the beautiful jungle canopy of the tea garden out front. The restaurant is pure British, with large doily settings and every conceivable piece of English silverware and waiters dressed in red and white sashes and turbans. The place is expensive, but one pays for the history, the atmosphere, the awards, the fame and infamy, and the formal service. All meals and afternoon tea are included in the price of the room. It's a great way to wrap up our India adventure and to draw a contrast with the parallel French colonial experience we had at Madame Michele's in Pondicherry.

**March 3, 2001.** Having arrived in Kolkata, we laid low, relaxing after our long train misadventure from Varanasi. But today was errand day, the first priority being to retrieve the package we had sent on from Pondicherry to the GPO here in Kolkata. I mention this because, while I've found traveling and conducting transactions in India easier and smoother than I did twenty-one years before, the visit to the GPO was Kafkaesque in proportion. Once we arrived in our taxi (driven by a Mr. Singh) and not having a clue as to which door or on which side of the building to enter, we wandered counterclockwise around this great white edifice—whose large main entry had long since been closed—and up a wide expanse of stairs and asked a man sitting at a table at the top of the steps where the GPO was. He directed us to go back around the building clockwise, where we climbed yet another wide expanse of stairs and asked a packaging man, also sitting at a table at the top of the stairs, where we could pick up a package. This man told us that we

first had to go to Enquiry, back around where we had just been. Once we arrived there again, we asked the man we asked before where Enquiry was. He pointed us to a door at the other end of the landing that said Customer Care, wherein I had to produce my passport in order to acquire a retrieval slip, to which I had to add my name and passport number, then write the same information in a log book. Then, having been vaguely directed by Customer Care Enquiry Office Personnel, we went back around, clockwise again, looking into various doorways and offices till our very kind packaging man directed us yet further around the building to the so-called Main Entrance, which turned out to be an alley for mail delivery vehicles. At the entrance of this alley, we had to show the retrieval slip that I'd acquired earlier in the Customer Care Enquiry Office. We wandered around the delivery vehicle staging area till we were directed up some stairs. Finally, we were actually inside the building now, which, once we reached the first floor (for us the second), revealed itself, indeed, to be the much sought-after parcel handling area. After much waving of arms and excuse-mes, we attracted the attention of a fellow to help us, who directed us inside the wire-mesh-enclosed employee area where he himself wandered about asking other employees what to do with the retrieval slip I'd given him. Finally, he was enlightened and a man was sent to retrieve the referred-to parcel, and Lo! The very same package I described was placed nearby with a thump, at which I exclaimed, "Careful now!" But the ordeal was not yet over, by any means. Our man asked for my passport, had me fill out yet another big, faded-green log book; meanwhile, we had to wait for his superior to finish up with lunch so the both of them in their turn could pore over every letter of my name and every digit of my passport number and

compare them to those on the retrieval slip, the log book, and the package itself. Of course, by this time, as is frequently the case in India, a good many folks had gathered around the desk to make sure the process proceeded properly—or simply out of idle state-funded curiosity. My heart leapt as our superior, by now holding the key to our fate, found that in one case my name was written as Richard Allen Clark and in another, Richard A. Clark. Fortunately, another uniform-clad figure standing by suggested, in Bengali, that the names certainly must refer to the same person. Once it had finally been confirmed and reconfirmed that the retrieval slip, the log, the package, and I were, indeed, without an infinitesimal doubt, linked, and I could *have* the damned thing (which was ours in the first place), our benefactors sent for a coolie. I had to let the little guy feel my biceps to convince him and everyone else waiting on us that I could, should, and would carry the package myself. Ah, but just as we were about to escape the monolith of the GPO, we were snatched up again in order to be issued a guest pass which would enable us to get past the guard at the main gate, the gaping mouth of the alley, with the goods. As if to extend the pleasure of the experience, our crowd of five postal employees now, insisted we take the lift down to the ground floor, all of them assisting us with the process, pushing buttons and sliding open the grate and sliding it closed behind us. Down finally on solid earth we clanked, out the building we pranced, under the scrutiny of the guard hesitated guiltily, then stumbled into the true light of day with the great weight of the system in the package on my shoulder.

I've heard a lot from people we've met about the corruption in the Indian government. This, of course, is not something I experienced firsthand but no doubt experienced roundabout.

There's plenty of wealth in India, lots of aid and development programs; taxes are collected, but unfortunately from too few citizens. In fact, the government is top-heavy with its elected and appointed officials, with state employees, and with process and paperwork. But where are the infrastructure, the roads, bridges, and byways, the pay phones, computer and Internet availability, and worse, the efficient service? I was always astounded that I could approach a counter in a bank or a post office and, while there were dozens of employees milling about, poring over ledgers, or chatting beyond, I couldn't get anyone to come up to the counter to help me. A visit to the bank or post office takes three to four times as long as it does in the U.S., while there are at least five times as many employees behind the counters. Maybe to get the job done right is better than to get it done at all! I suppose all this ranting suggests a kind of culture shock. I want the differences; that's why I travel to places like India. But I seem to want what is difficult to be made easy and what is incredible, like temples, villages, and wildlife reserves, to be kept beautiful. Still, though I can look upon India from a critical standpoint (once I've removed myself), when I'm amidst the chaos, the ugliness, and the filth, viewing a ritual or an icon or a sea of migrating birds, I'm lost to the experience, all my senses alive with raw input. A traveler, one who does not seek a holiday, a vacation, per se, but strives to see the unadulterated world as it is, must see and accept it all. I have no trouble doing this, but no matter how submerged I am in an experience, I still catch a glimpse of the garbage out of the corner of my eye.

Red tape still occupies way too much time, too much energy, too many "employees," and too much travel time of tourists and travelers. Information, much of it superfluous, seems to have some unexplainable inherent value, as if the gathering,

processing, and storing of information—the information itself—sustains the livelihood, the very soul, of India. Ledger books, log books, record books—all with dull green covers, are ubiquitous, stacked high on desks, shelves, tables, and floor—even when there are computers in use! Still, bureaucracy keeps a whole lot of people busy, keeps them employed and salaried, and gives a sense of purpose to millions of people sloshing about in a sea of seeming purposelessness otherwise.

And if humankind created the world as we know it, if humankind created gods and God and everything in which they believe, what does it say about humankind, what we're capable of, what vision? Greatness, even perfection, one might think! Or is the vision the escape, the excuse, the distraction, the justification, the vain qualification, the eternal postponement of good and right action? I'm prone to think both.

How could it have happened? Yet it did. We arrived together: I met a man whose name was mine. You met a woman whose name is yours. We all traveled the same mute paths, looked into all the same harsh mirrors. So we had to merge in the same Kolkata lobby, to move on, more whole, than we could ever have imagined. And the light shone exactly as bright as it actually shone. The air was air, the beer just beer, and all of human history one of a billion tales.

Last night, for our first dinner down in the Fairlawn Hotel restaurant, we were seated with an Austrian couple named Peter and Herta, from Vienna, and an Italian named Giovanni, from Bologna. We had a lovely conversation that eventually had the red-clad, turban-covered waiters hovering around us anxious to

close up shop. Our conversations covered American and E.U. politics, friendship, archaeology, and even a bit of literature and music. It was good to have some mature conversation with some older, worldlier people, as all five of us have traveled a lot. The Austrians were to leave the next day, but we had the good fortune to sit with Giovanni on the occasion of every meal. He's an archaeologist and professor at the university in Bologna, an authentic fieldwork scholar, whose work included following up on the destruction of the great stone buddhas in Afghanistan. We learned so much about archaeology in India, Nepal, and China, where he specializes, but also about history, culture, and language as well. It was as if we had a graduate seminar lecturer all to ourselves at our dinner table. Not that it was one-sided or at all formal, as in a lecture hall. I think Giovanni really enjoyed hearing from us, too, and riding out the twists and turns of our conversation. Now and then one of his latest theses or hypotheses made its way to the surface, which thrilled me, truly. I love the scientific process! We exchanged contact information, and he told us to contact him if ever we get close to Bologna, and we told him we could put him up or show him some sights of archaeological interest if ever he passed through Seattle.

Then, tonight at the dinner table, we got to know a Beijing couple living in Delhi, visiting Kolkata on business. Their names are Liu and Jhao. During dinner tonight, our third dinner together, they began warming up to us and began talking about the Cultural Revolution in China. I had no sense of how freely Chinese can talk about that terrible event in Chinese history, but I learned it was acceptable to talk about it as a wrong turn even by those at home and not merely by those traveling abroad, free of censure. Wow! The Great Revolution seems to

have come and gone, all in some containable, graspable period of my life. Better gone than about to come, though! But then there's always some other place, at some other time, such as Tibet, Afghanistan, and Indonesia, where tumult is the theme.

Meeting Giovanni and others at the dinner table was definitely a highlight of residing these four nights at the Fairlawn Hotel in Kolkata, where older, more moneyed, often more established folks stay.

**March 4, 2001.** Today we did a little sightseeing around Kolkata. We hired a Mr. Singh to drive us in his taxi for the morning (350 rupees). He owns his own well-kept old yellow-and-black, works for himself, and is a straightforward, clean, helpful, turbaned gentleman who warned us not to give any more than 50 rupees at Kalighat, where he took us first, since it was too early to visit the other destinations.

When we entered the inevitably frenetic compound, we were immediately taken up by a young man who told us he was "the" temple priest and who began guiding us through the temple grounds. We followed, thinking we were somehow privileged to be escorted by a priest. After all, he had a brass badge with a number inscribed on it. He led us, squeezing through, past the long lines of devotees, into the temple structure itself so we could view the main icon of Kali itself, a rather cartoon-esque image resembling Jaganath in Puri—with a third eye, of course. Before he led us there, though, he had prepared us with garlands with which to touch to our foreheads and to throw at the icon. No photos! I did manage to click one shot off, with the priest's consent, of the milling, flower-throwing masses in the atrium. Then our priest-guide led us out the other side so we could see "a waiting goat," which he recommended I photograph as well,

since the goat was soon to meet her maker, to be sacrificed at the altar. Just a goat, yet I took another photo, certain a slide would capture the poor goat's fate—in its terrified face and trembling body. Then we entered the slaughtering ghat, just in time to see, first, a bit of an argument about what seemed to be procedure, perhaps whose goat would go next, then, second, "the man" gathered a yearling by pulling its forelegs up behind its back, slapping its neck down through a sort of guillotine-type stock, sliding a bar down to hold down its neck, then another man cut its little head off with one swift slice of an incredibly sharp knife. Till this last step, the animal, this lovely little creature, was bleating and trembling, smelling the blood and frenzy in the air. The little goat's body continued to kick while—and this was the image I'll never forget—the head lay on the flagstone, still rolling its eyes back to see what was happening, what had happened to its body, its tongue bleating silently, without its lungs to produce a sound, in the wild commotion of mad superstition. It was at this moment that I decided I don't like Hinduism as a religion, or at least the way it's practiced, believing it's a backward system of beliefs, as religions go—an inhumane set of superstitions, for all practical purposes. All this bloodletting in order to appease a vengeful goddess, to relieve the fearful hearts of "sinners." Then our man led us into the atrium again to see the priests blessing those who need extra attention or who can't afford to buy a goat for sacrifice. I was told poor untouchables eat the meat. Then the "priest" took us over to the bathing ghat, which looks like a standard ancient stone-stair water tank, where several men (men only) were bathing and snorting the water. The priest took first me, then Fran, to pray to an icon of Shiva's wife, Saraswati, to touch a garland of red flowers to our foreheads, "make a wish," then place the

string of flowers around the stone goddess's neck. It was at this moment that the inevitable fellow showed up with the donation log, showing evidence that other foreigners had donated either 2100 or 4200 rupees on previous occasions. Taken again! The alleged purpose of the money was to help pay for food for poor people that the temple provides every afternoon. We had all the while padded through the wet, dirty, often blossom-mushy compound barefoot. Then after we got cleaned up back in the little room where we'd left our shoes, first the women there wanted money, then our "priest," out at the taxi, wanted money for his services, as well. I had given 200 rupees to the guy for food for poor people in front of the stone goddess of Saraswati, ten more to the shoe-storage foot-washing-room woman, but I certainly was not going to give more money to a man who claimed he was a priest, whom we never asked or contracted to guide us, who insisted he was not a guide, who may not really be connected formally or professionally with Kalighat in any capacity whatsoever!

I am innocent of your religious, your cultural, your superstitious madness. You are not a priest who does nothing more than guide me through the sights, through a puja to some ivory goddess, saying take a photo here, take a photo there. You are not a priest, who then asks me for money, for more money than even I, an American, have on hand. You are not a priest who asks so little of his own people, his own believers and worshippers and appeasers of the Goddess of Destruction, who every four minutes murders a goat, takes a life, the life of a beautiful small bleating kid. No. You are no priest who asks me to pay for such blood, blood that flows more freely than vision, more thickly than care. I see only madness, fervor, frenzy in

this grasping at other lives, at other times and other worlds, while hacking the head off the quaking, bleating kid here and now. You say religion, culture, custom, belief, and I say madness and cowardice. You are no priest who gets me to sign my name in your register and flip bills into your ever-dirtier palm! I'm done with this Hinduism and your severed goat's head, it's eyes rolling back in search of its missing still kicking body, it's tongue still bleating without a sound.

After the debacle at Kalighat, Mr. Singh drove us up to the St. Paul Cathedral. What a cool, shadowy, peaceful sanctum sanctorum is the Christian temple by comparison to the sheer frenzy and blood of the Hindu temple! Lots of silent crypts of military officers and early Kolkata dignitaries and lovely stained glass windows to further strike a note of solemnity. It struck me that the quiet folks there were between masses, quietly nibbling at cake and sipping tea and coffee in an adjoining entry. I didn't bother shooting pictures there, especially outside the cathedral, which was particularly lackluster.

Then we whisked nearby to the most famous sight in Kolkata, the Victoria Monument, set in a vast garden with ponds and waterways, all kept in the British style. Inside, we spent as much time as we could afford, scanning the very thorough Kolkata Gallery, a photo and text history of the founding and growth of this originally British trade outpost. It would have taken us all day, at least, to look at and read it all thoroughly, so we gathered momentum till we were hardly looking at all—till we entered the central atrium of the monstrous structure, where there were photo displays of the peoples of various regions of India, much more interesting to me, really, than the colonial history of Kolkata. I'm not much for stuffy old museums.

***War Museum***

*I'd like to file a complaint:*
*What is the meaning of this*
*immortalization of a cannon*
*I paid an entrance fee to see?*

*Isn't the antiquated bomber*
*propped up as if in flight*
*a ball and chain around*
*the ankle of history?*

*Why the 303 Enfield rifle*
*and not the rivers of blood*
*its rounds of shells spilled*
*in a vat beside its display?*

*I'm all for keeping track,*
*but this missile is kept*
*too well polished, too*
*fastidiously free of dust.*

*To whom shall I*
*address my letter?*
*Above is my*
*complaint.*

At the other end of the spectrum from Medieval bloodletting to the gods, in opposition to the memorial to British colonialism and oppression, at the opposite end of town, stands the University and Memorial of Rabindranath Tagore, Shanti Niketan. We saw the dining room, the kitchen, the later addition for meetings of intellectuals and revolutionaries in the Bengal resistance for which the place is so noted. There were lots of photos of the

activist and poet Tagore with famous thinkers and writers and in good company in the various countries to which he traveled. In side rooms, with curtains drawn, students and other small groups can hold clandestine meetings. In one, a small group of progressive young women were holding a meeting while we were there. They whisked the curtain shut when they saw us. Then we checked out a couple of other rooms, one where quotes were framed and another where Tagore drew his last breath, where there was a single picture of the man and a vase of flowers set in the middle of a design in the middle of the floor, all cordoned off to the viewer by a low rail. There were also two galleries with, unfortunately, very few paintings by the great man himself, so we bought a pack of postcards. It's a beautiful, serene, well-kept place for liberal arts education and progressive thinking. Hats off to a true leader, who was the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, for his book of poetry *Gitanjali*.

Later in the evening, we finally got over to College Street, principally to meet the poet Kamelesh Sen, whose name Dr. Maiti had given me and whose person he was promoting I seek out. But we apparently got there before the man generally does (the first waiter we asked told us this), so I left him a note. In other words, we never connected. But the India Coffee House looked like the real thing, where poets, painters, and intellectuals have been gathering for decades. The small round tables, the sophisticated, bunch-browed students and professors, the smoke and brain-hot atmosphere and undertones, all made me want to stay for a taste, to see whom I might meet. But instead, we poured back out onto the bookstall-lined street, where we caught a taxi back to Sudder Street.

**March 5, 2001.** Today was our last full day in Kolkata and India, so we packed, repacked, and went shopping over in the big (new) market nearby, ultimately buying only a few packets of fresh spices. We had a list of spices that a friend on the train ride from Moghul Serrai to Kolkata recommended. We engaged with the shopkeepers, in the usual dickering and salesmanship, but what I found interesting was the young Japanese woman sitting and smoking behind the counter of the stall we selected. She admitted she wasn't shopping, nor did she know the two guys selling the spices. She didn't have any money with which to buy spices, she told us. Why was she sitting there? She may have been stoned, got scared in the crowded labyrinthine market, escaped behind the counter, was quietly cringing in the unsuspecting safety of the spice sellers. Or maybe she was trying to overcome her culture shock or make friends or just watch the colorful people pass by—this fantastically different world compared to Japan!

Still, whereas we were repulsed by the diseased, deformed, and destitute people grasping at us, actually doing a little last-second dance around a clawing hand or shaking loose a clawed hand clinging to an ankle, by the end of the journey, we may have achieved a degree of magnanimousness in our perspectives and attitudes. Our last day on Kolkata, having wrapped up our shopping, we had a few leftover rupees. I gave the coins to the deformed fellow who kept himself posted outside the gate of the Fairlawn Hotel, at which gesture Fran suggested I give him our leftover ten-rupee note. It was clear by the demeanor of his deformed face and broken, humped body that he felt like he'd hit the jackpot. Later, we went out with a few items of clothing and Fran's pseudo-yoga mat to give to a homeless woman and

her children, which the woman gladly accepted. The little deformed fellow at the gate, apparently feeling he'd become our chosen benefactor, wondered why we hadn't given these last items to him as well, but he accepted Fran's explanation that the homeless family needed those items—and my reasoning that we'd already given him some money. The point is that we were interacting with these people in such a way that we weren't really seeing their deformities and shortcomings so much as seeing them as regular, albeit needy, human beings. One does, indeed, adjust to the worst of worlds—and to the best—given time. After all, our friend Ramesh, in the United States, has become a full-blown American, working as a regular employee at Microsoft, owning a nice little Seattle house, and hanging out, often, with American friends. I'm anxious to talk with him about this drastic shift (not that all Indians are beggars and all Americans wealthy).

***Tourist Beggar***

*We gave the little man*
*with the crooked smiling face*
*and sun-black skin,*
*rotting, betel-stained gums,*
*a hump upon his back*
*and a hand snapped over*
*at the wrist, like a permanent*
*signal flag flapping*
*in the wind of hunger—*
*we gave him three rupees,*
*our leftover coins*
*before departure,*
*then a leftover ten-rupee note.*

*And what did we get in return?*
*Why, we got the green-go light,*
*a soundless slap on the back,*
*the okay to stand erect,*
*a nod from God,*
*thirteen rupees worth of good karma,*
*a great weight like a boulder*
*lifted from our shoulders,*
*out first real-world diploma.*
*We got a vision*
*of a perfectly normal deformed*
*and broken man, a human being*
*in a perfectly acceptable twisted heap*
*and a certain smug self-love*
*invisible as pure unadulterated light*
*which we suck on*
*like a piece of candy.*

Approach cautiously! You are my millionth tout. What do you mean just look? I am looking. These are eyes that sweep your humble wares. I am not a bank. I am a human being, with a finite job at a finite salary, a finite budget and finite quantity of money in my wallet, with a real life, real problems, specific tastes, needs, and feelings that I'm in touch with. There may be some one specific item I'm looking for, and you more than likely don't have it (you don't). You may be in an altogether different line of business; you may stock an altogether different line of goods. Believe it or not, you may not be the one! You may be talking to altogether the wrong customer. Careful now.

# Epilogue: Back in the Good Ol' U.S.A.

**March 9, 2001.** We have returned to the U.S.! We're home! I have a cold, and, although my body knows just what to do here, around the house, driving, running errands, preparing to return to teaching, I feel in a bit of a swirl. Of course, I'm exhausted too, having slept little our last night in Kolkata, little our second night, in Bangkok, and virtually none in transit or since we've arrived home.

**March 14, 2001.** Fran said last night it's almost as if we never went to India—so quickly does the great and wild past slip out of our grasp. And to visit friends now, on our return, is to scatter the memories willy-nilly out of context like snapshots spilled on a cluttered floor. The irony is that when I went to pick up my slides at the drugstore, less than 10 percent of them had been exposed! Wow, did my heart sink fast and hard! (My guess is that the shutter was sticking.) So, yes, I scatter hundreds of photographs to the river, just as Li Po released his poems to float down the river (and sink), never to be seen again. I do my best to smile, to consider myself lucky to have taken shape in

this universe, as all that comes must pass, dust to dust, que sera sera...(I wax philosophical here).

Riding the trains around India is partly what made our adventure what it was. The system, consisting of a number of subsystems or companies regionally, is quite good. Making reservations, once we figured out how to use the *Trains at a Glance* schedule book and began ignoring the *India by Rail* book we purchased before we left, was relatively easy. Finding the A1 car when the train pulled beside the platform could occasionally be confusing, and there was often some hurried competition and confusion getting established in our compartment, that is, securing our bags under the bottom seats or berths and attaching ourselves to our assigned berths, or to the two berths that gave us the most togetherness, privacy, and security in relation to our bags below. But riding the train enabled us to see the land pass by during the day, the paddies, fields, groves, villages, towns, and cities, and to sleep—rather than foot for a hotel room—for the price of our journey. We must have paid for ten fewer nights in hotels because we took sleepers between distant points on the map. But the best thing about riding the trains is that we saw a lot of people up close, at close quarters, so to speak, and met—got to know—some Indian folks about as well as one can in a 24 or 48 hour period. We sometimes lingered in our upper berths in the morning, but eventually we had to come down and spend some time communicating—or trying to communicate—with the pair of travelers or small family below. This way we got to know two insurance marketers from Kerala and a Sikh family from Varanasi. Sometimes this was comfortable, sometimes not. One time we had a pair of army officers below, on their way to Kashmir, who seemed very much inclined to keep to themselves. Food was reasonably good and reasonably cheap as

prepared in the pantry car. And, of course, at stops, of which there are many, venders passed through touting snacks, tea, coffee, and cold drinks. We also learned that going AC Second Class was a good choice, as in the AC First Class cars you still have to share your compartment with others, the spaces are often dirtier, cleaned less often, and venders take the liberty to open compartment doors in order to call out their goods. So AC First Class is no better than AC Second Class based on our experience. Second Class compartments have curtains, which, incidentally, are swished aside or, more typically, inadvertently inched aside by passersby in the aisle. Trains tend to run on time more often than not, occasionally delivering us to our destination early, occasionally late. One fellow traveler was certain we saved quite a bit of money going as far as we did on our passes, not to mention how convenient it was to have them, to make a number of reservations in advance, then at departure time board without having to reconfirm (generally) or buy a ticket as the train's about to depart. We may not travel so far next time we go to India to justify buying passes, but we will nevertheless travel by train. It's a great way to participate in the culture. For this I am grateful for the British presence in India—not that I sanction their imperial mistreatment of the indigenous people at the time. Still, the train system is a great legacy in infrastructure.

I can't help but compare the India of 2001 with the India of 1980, when my friend Steve McCall and I traveled there, when I was a younger, less experienced man—not that I haven't come to some of the same conclusions. The country has grown up in many of the ways one would expect in this ever more global environment (here on Earth). It's easier to travel—that is, there are more trains, planes, buses, taxis, auto-rickshaws,

motorcycles, scooters, and cars for both public and private transportation. Public transportation tends to depart and arrive on time. Seats are more readily available and more comfortable, and it's less common that you'll have a passenger sitting on your shoulder or knee or standing on your foot or even leaning against your leg. There are STDs (phone services) and Internet stations almost everywhere. It was virtually always easy to make a phone call. Hotels, at least budget hotels, while not having gotten too much more expensive, are better assigned, with better toilets, showers (some still lack hot water), beds, and fans, if not with TVs and air conditioning. We averaged about 400 rupees (about nine dollars) a night for accommodations over all. Food everywhere is tastier, more diverse, and healthier. And Fran and I never got sick from food (Anita claims it was that fish dinner that got her sick in Mahabalipuram, though she and I ate the same fish and I didn't get sick).

Although Indians are looking outward—more and more toward the U.S., I perceive—the country is still one great self-consuming vortex of hunger and grasping at whatever island of strength (or monetary resource) happens by, exemplified by how touts and beggars harass, pester, grab at, argue with, cheat, and sometimes steal from travelers, tourists, and Westerners, in general. We often felt like nothing more than walking talking opportunities for touts, beggars, and scammers—as if we lacked mind, heart, feelings, budget, problems, lives at home, or points of view. It's dehumanizing, one, to be so hungry, needy, and grasping as to have to accost innocent, generally white-skinned, passersby and, two, to be victimized so indiscriminately by these same hungry, needy, and grasping human beings. The natural response is to seal oneself up against this battering of the sea of hunger and destitution, to ignore the lepers, the congenitally

and purposefully broken and deformed, the fingerless, legless, noseless tangles of human beings rolling along on carts, walking on hands, or "schlumping" along without any sort of machine or aide, without home, family, or state support. Indeed, I'm reminded of Steve's and my first day out in New Delhi in 1980. After walking around stepping over people with elephantiasis and the like, with a begging hand held high in the air like a flag, we had to return to our room, lie on our backs on our beds, and stare up at the empty ceiling in a state of shock, till hunger finally forced us out onto the streets again.

**April 5, 2001.** What I thought we intended by going to India was to prove to ourselves that we could, indeed, break out of our routines and responsibilities and our growing material lives here in the United States and travel relatively unfettered by plans or goals, expectations or itinerary. And certainly we proved this to ourselves, that we can still do so—wander somewhat aimlessly, with packs on our backs as in younger days, hearing about a great town to visit, like Pushkar, and changing our plans along the way to go there. This is how I like to live my life, with the unknown beckoning, a shadowy lane drawing me along with its shimmering green loveliness—always a little shadow to set off the sunlight. We also *needed* that break in our intensity; we needed some distance and perspective for reflection. So much has transpired, we've accomplished so much, been so achievement-, especially productivity-oriented, that we needed to step out, turn around, and look up to bring our lives into focus and see them for their real dimensions and significance. This I think we both succeeded in doing, but we still haven't managed to decide what to do about the Seattle house, or when to make the ocean house our main residence,

though I'm determined to make a break from the teaching, at least for awhile, and to begin writing full-time to make a living. I can hold out for only so long: The cherry blossoms are fluttering to the ground.

**April 18, 2001.** The great surprise for me in going to India is that I wrote so much. And I'm still writing—as much as I can as I teach and strain to get back up to speed with my life back home again. At some point, I got into a rhythm of writing an entry almost every day, sometimes half a dozen pages, other times not a jot due to the fact that we were too much in motion and the buses bumped and the trains rocked and jostled. Sometimes I wrote straight journalistic entries detailing the movements and incidents of the day, sometimes I built an event or experience into an outright story, sometimes I wrote descriptive "in the moment" pieces in which I opened my senses to the minutest sounds, sights, and smells, and sometimes I wrote poems, either in prose or in lines, some more consciously "poetic" than others. I even wrote an aphorism or two, some ideas for other writings, even a childhood memory—all, I like to think, in the cohering context of our India journey.

The beauty is that I opened a space in time to let or make happen all nature of writing. I reminded myself, when I began to feel aimless or purposeless, that that was why we went to India, so that I could open to this other world—the barrage of stimuli, sights, sounds, details, differences, other people's views and stories—until it just flowed through me, till I came to trust the flow through me, and till I recognized that all I had to do was to open myself to the wild and wonderful world and wait with my pen. And now I know that I need to return to keeping a journal—a more formal journal like this one, in which I write

and reflect on significant, interesting, or ironic incidents from the day. I'm sold. And keeping this journal successfully while traveling through India sold me on it. But I think the reason I'm so happy with what I've written here is not because I wrote diligently or opened myself to the experience of India or even to the many possibilities for entries, but because I wrote knowing I was going to send installments to my friend Steve, in Portland, Oregon, with whom I traveled to India twenty years before. Having an intended audience in mind when I wrote made all the difference—and then to find a natural (my natural) voice on top of that made for a beautiful writing experience. Writing a book-length, somewhat unified piece in which I find or develop my voice has given me confidence as a writer. I also have a verbal collection of pictures that make up for the devastating loss of most of my India slides.

**April 19, 2001.** On the other hand, I didn't take my violin with me to India. For one thing, I wasn't in a hurry to subject another instrument to the hot humid weather (my previous violin broke in 1980 when I was tuning it in Sri Lanka). Also, I knew this was a journey in which we'd be moving a lot, when opportunities to play would be minimal. Also, I wanted to focus on writing. But what surprised me was that I missed playing as deeply as I did. I find I whistle more when I don't have my violin to play. But I really missed it physically. My body ached for it sometimes, as if a hungry ghost inhabited my body. My muscles began to atrophy, my fingers to stiffen. The beauty of putting aside an intense, stressful, and habituated discipline, particularly of the physical sort, is that, while I was rusty and weak when I returned to it, once I'd practiced, played, and improvised for a while, I came back all the stronger, all the

more technically and musically advanced. It occurs to me that it's good to let the body—perhaps the mind—"blob out" for a period, so that it can reform, reshape, and re-groove anew, within and around demanding and sophisticated activity. Never have I arrived so strongly at this otherwise creeping conclusion as I did through leaving my tense preoccupation and compulsion behind and by going to India for ten weeks on end. This was another unexpected, inadvertent, and surprisingly wonderful purpose in retrospect for having gone, parallel to getting perspective by putting some distance between oneself and one's life back home.

**April 25, 2001.** I went to India because I trusted it would make a difference, that I would be diverted from my quite possibly entrenched life course, my rut, as deep or shallow as it might have been. When I went to India as a younger man, I saw how difficult it was just to get life's basics in India, and how easy it was to get the basics in the U.S. and much more. How easy it is to get a decent education, a decent paying job, a house, or at least an apartment, of one's own. How easy it is to change course, to switch jobs, switch careers, switch houses, switch spouses, switch religions, switch states, switch lifestyles. Choices like candy. Of course, it's harder for some than others in the U.S., but choice and mobility are realities here. I had rediscovered playing violin as a possibility in my life again long before I left, but having writhed spiritually through and with the idea and reality of India, I returned committed to pursuing playing as a full life practice. What did I have to lose? I could easily provide for myself and still study music.

I went to drift. And I drifted. I went to find my love again, my wife. And I found her, whom I went to see, hear, taste, and

touch—and be touched by. And I did—and I was. I went to throw myself out of my world. And I dislodged myself, threw myself over, pushed through the malaise of aimlessness and purposelessness and discovered new aims and purposes. I went to write, and I wrote beyond my expectations. I went to heighten my senses, attend to detail, step out of myself, and grapple with "the other," in all its magnitude and plenitude. I went to prove I could go, to prove I could let go, to prove I could go without, to go light, to go for going's sake. And I went without looking back, without looking at my other life. Went. Without. Outside. Way outside my usual comfort in—and thereby entered the self removed. And, of course, I went to let down, to let my mind and body slump, go limp, unwind, regroup, sleep the long deep sleep, get in touch with the noise of my mind, the tickling of the body, the clenching, the obsessions, the habituations, the grating and grappling.

India taught me the relativity of existence, of ways of life, belief and value systems, morals, freedoms and expectations, reinforcing and reaffirming my existential perspective and approach to life. We need to see this relativity, to be able to step back outside, see how we tend to be confined by narrow perceptions, by the context or routine in which we live. Then it's only a matter of choosing and acting, tuning and concentrating, and returning to and participating in the world one chooses. Life is a smorgasbord, and one may have to come back inside to feast and choose what one likes that one can heap on one's plate without it tumbling off.

In other words, who am I to think my life is difficult? Who am I to think my world, the world I choose, is tough on me? Who am I to think there's anyone but me keeping me from my dreams? Traveling through India freely for ten weeks, *itself,* was

a dream we were readily able to make come true. India, while it presents huge challenges, is so energized and energizing, so vividly colorful and sense-stimulating, so contrary to the American, even the Western, way of life, that I am inevitably and profoundly changed. I am enlivened and filled with images and sensations I will never forget.

Rick Clark presently pursues writing full-time after having taught college English for 18 years and, in an earlier manifestation, English as a Second Language for six years, mostly living and working in Japan. He has published poems in small magazines and written for film, notably *Beauty of the Fight*. On the side, he provides writing, editing, and coaching services and keeps a Nature Mind oriented blog at wrenzai.wordpress.com. He and his wife, Seattle yoga instructor Fran Gallo, hold a variety of retreats on the Washington coast. Recently, Rick has set out to found two small presses. A book of bird and bug haiku, with illustrations by Northwest sumi artist Fumiko Kimura, is forthcoming from Red Moon Press.