

**IRWIN ALLAN SEALY**

*from Zelaldinus: A Masque*

‘While Zelaldinus [Jalal-ud-din Akbar, the Great Mughal]  
was residing at Agra, he decided to remove his court to Sikri...’

*Jesuit Father Monserrate, reporting from Akbar’s court to Rome, 1579*

In the inner court of Akbar's palace at Fatehpur Sikri is a broad stone terrace with a chequered pattern that resembles a game board. Here, contemporary accounts say, the emperor played a kind of chess using human pieces drawn from his harem of three hundred. Costumed in various guises, schooled perhaps by a mistress of ceremonies, his women would have presented lively masques upon this stage.

*Zelaldinus* mounts such a pageant, glittering and fantastical, where past and present, nobles and commoners, history and fiction rub shoulders. The emperor himself, a man of limitless enthusiasms, is both chief participant and magus.

Our scene opens on the Aravalis, that chain of red hills at Sikri, played by ladies who wave lengths of billowing red muslin in the background. Enter upon the redstone stage a company of Amazons, the king's guard, who form by gymnastic evolutions a human pyramid representing the imperial capital of Fatehpur, lately built on Sikri hill. From their midst bursts a magnificent warrior, an Abyssinian eunuch resplendent in cloth-of-gold. To the booming of drums from the drum house this grandee, ordinarily the chamberlain, mounts level by level a five-tiered pavilion on whose summit waits the emperor. At the topmost step the warrior halts and bows deeply. The drumming, which has reached a crescendo, breaks off into resounding silence.

Akbar, disclosed on high, advances a half step to acknowledge the keys of the city. At that prompt the action begins on the chequered terrace, telling the story of Sikri, retelling also the story of Akbar.

Whereupon a fleet of gleaming Volvo buses appears below the palace and disgorges a Teutonic tourist army bristling with cameras.

Lastly there appears, grimed and dented, an elderly UP Roadways bus that judders to a halt outside the city wall. From it alights a single passenger, the narrator, Irv.

S U M M E R

*irv*

i got in late at night  
and took the only bed.  
hotel trishul, a fright

in six colours at the foot of the red  
city. pink tiled bathroom a joke  
encrypted. kitchen instead

head-on, its furnace blast insinuating smoke.  
no view, no starlit pillow  
i slept a steep and dreamless sleep and woke

at lunchtime to a flotilla  
of phulka roti scuppered by pure ghee,  
mother's dal and soursweet armadillo

pumpkin. koel in the tree  
disposed to prate,  
phone dead, no a/c

no lady love to sate,  
no desert cooler.  
unfazed, koel serenades his mate,

no hint of cloud to fool her,  
just prickly heat and pain  
and pledges to some day bejewel her

in showers of rain.  
still—Zelaldinus' city hard by, straight  
up. how could a man complain?

there we were, gate to gate  
the King and i. except that first you dree  
the steep track every walker must negotiate,

pilgrim, or papal nuntio—or me.

*Father Antonio Monserrate continues his letter to Rome:*

‘While Zelaldinus was residing at Agra, he decided to remove his court to Sikri in accordance with the advice of a certain philosopher who was then living in a small hut on this hill.’

*the saint*

*saint*—  
not philosopher.  
get it right.

and *small* hut?  
it's not that small.

anyway, whose advice?  
not mine—i just  
bespoke Him a son  
and He took it for sooth  
and went home  
and did His tilth, and lo  
one came along, god help us.

so He sends His missus  
and the sprog, named for me  
to keep me company—*me*, company!

ask any son of this soil  
ask naubat singh, tiller,  
what all the dhoom dhaam  
was about and he'll look troubled  
as if caught out in disfealty.

*sons anyone can make*  
he means to say, abashed,  
having made four  
(himself not yet twenty-eight)  
and three daughters.

this hill was theirs,  
they ploughed and scattered in its lee,  
at seedtime cursed the starlings  
and the herd of bluebull  
that grubbed up the green shoots.

oh, when they heard a queen was coming to live amongst them  
the village was agog  
and the women put on airs.

naubat ploughed and harrowed as before,  
and sniffing the air for taxes  
made him one son more.

### *Sikri Hill*

Part of the Aravali range, more ancient than the Himalayas. The Aravalis shield the Gangetic plain to the east from the Great Indian Desert beneath whose sands lost rivers wander looking for the vanished ocean. For centuries red sandstone, or Agra stone, has been quarried here and travelled as far as the imperial city of Delhi.

But the redstone crown belongs to Akbar's capital, Fatehpur, the deserted citadel on Sikri hill.



*the saint (before Akbar)*

rock  
no whale

hill

bare but  
for hut

cloud  
going from crocodile

no—going from long  
to short

to  
two

man  
on red rock  
shaded by cloud

all you can say

but days too i sit on a red cloud  
and stupendous white millstones grind overhead

\*

to tell the truth i  
(desert saint, sick of speech)  
came here to avoid  
a plague of snails  
in one wet valley

snails as big as dogs  
(small dogs)

vile crunch underfoot  
up every alley  
in every cot  
me asking have i sinned or what

\*

then look what happens

i fall in love with a hill

with its dry silence  
with the sound of rock splitting

the tumbling green bee eaters  
twisted thorn trees

even the scorpions scuttling  
you just have to be careful

the heat  
well yes

\*

then  
november nights steal up on you  
i'm given a shawl

a widow offers six almonds

\*

(the sound of my voice  
pleasant to me again

as shepherd *ho-o-ay*)

\*

it rains here too  
short rains

thundershowers that sweep by  
and leave the whole hill gasping

all night the suck of countless rock mouths  
under the old parched stars

\*

solitude or no?

His saint  
like His Majesty

is at a loss  
so let me toss

this small  
pierced coin.

tails!—*company*  
damn

well then  
one city

no more

no less

*the prime minister on an eminence*

already i see it spread out—His Majesty  
the architect—not city but sagacity.

ship of state upon the hill, challenging the sky,  
watchtower on the flat. powder magazine on high,

dovecotes endungeoned. gold hoard in some unspeci  
fied keep. human chessboard on that dizzy preci

pice. tunnel to hot weather chambers fitly dank.  
sewage pipes kinked, wells downhill from the water tank.

drum house competing with the elephants' trumpet  
concertos. caravanserai's inhouse strumpet

obbligatos. lord high executioner thrums  
instruments of beastly torture, pilliwinks, hums

a pretty tune. peacocks throng the bathhouse kiosks,  
milch cattle browse upon the royal mint. neem bosks

dot the parkland, love-lies-bleeding in the lettuce.  
a titter escapes the harem's marble lattice

as the deaf eunuch consorts with his skeleton  
key. light turpitude invades the panopticon.

snuff godown, melon patch, string chest, camel chimney.  
does *no* detail escape His Majesty's sharp eye?

*omens*

omens come from inside too  
but the outer truly bite

the comet that hung on the horizon  
a smoking javelin

a rash of cauls  
a rain of frogs  
cracks in walls  
mange in dogs

harelips  
leafshed out of season  
stencil moultings in bandicoots

at twelve o'clock  
on the twelfth day  
of the twelfth month  
at the twelfth imperial milestone  
a twelve foot snakeskin  
woe!

skeins of waterbirds writing the same dire alphabet over and over

and then the dreams  
such tortured visitations  
i was pressed shrink  
to King and commoner

the King saw a date palm lead His army  
a widow saw a weevil wreck her thatch  
(the wonder is she told me)

should the birth of a city  
occasion so much fright,  
would we wall up virgins next?

so god sent nabi the fireworker  
to summon comets of his own  
intelligent rocketry in gold chalcedony and rose  
alizarin crimson  
sikri red

weal!

*aphorisms of the King*

- look, just go conquer sindh—I can't be everywhere at once.
- I'll dismember the man who slanders My saint with My bare hands.
- that line about redemption—run it past Me again, father whatsyourname.
- this is one country—Mine.
- you tell your king Our painters gild the sun.
- and Our singer guides the moon.
- now who's for a game of tag-the-leopard?
- My supersubtle finance minister, just close down the royal mint for a decade—simple!
- I've been thinking—if We ratchet up the pinwheel We'll lift the water twice as fast.
- You feel sorry for meateaters, lining their stomachs with souls.
- but what of Us, deaf to the artichoke's cries?
- one more thing—if all faiths are equally true, does it follow that all are equally false?
- We'll put the books here—next to the armour.
- then I'll marry her too.
- —*and* her.
- chamberlain, this pillow's soft.

### *Petruccioli's map*

It's the best there is, and it's tucked away in an academic text. Until Attilio Petruccioli in the 1980s nobody had cared to do a proper survey. The map shows the whole length of Sikri hill—like a camel seen from above, with the citadel strung out along the spine—and the countryside round about, so you suddenly remember what everybody had forgotten, that there was a lake beyond and that that was the front of Akbar's city. Today every visitor uses the back way, by the Archaeological Survey of India's ticket gate; the ASI's writ runs here. Only the villagers of old Sikri to the north see the true face of the citadel; the townies of Fatehpur on the other side, know just the municipal end, the way the railway came. In 1900 when the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, who had long championed the restoration of Akbar's monument, prepared to bless the finished work of the ASI, a line was pushed out from Agra and a special little station built; the Vicereine would have used the Arts and Crafts tiled powder room. A little later there was a chance an English monarch would grace the little town in a ceremony of imperial succession, the British Raj replacing the Mughal, but it didn't work out. Petruccioli's map shows the elongated disposition of the stone city, imposed by nature on the original architects, and restores a sense of discarded patterns of usage, an orientation recoverable by the visitor willing to strike out into the countryside below the old Elephant Gate and walk along the old lakeshore, pressing into the cornfields that cover the old lake bed.



*the ticket gate*

irv takes the palace by a side door  
neither tradesman nor noble  
but alu puri-breakfasted bore-

geois in quo vadis sandals,  
with sketchbook, no camera to declare,  
only a genius for late rising. vandal

sun high, grey t-shirt clinging, slick hair,  
bisleri water bottle tepid,  
ten rupee ticket wilting in plein air,

the a.s.i.'s limp bromo paper so vapid  
it parts along the perforation  
from the counterfoil, unbuttoning the dotted

line without a sound. no peppy crepitation  
no tiny luscious enfilade from childhood rites  
of passage (stumbling choked with expectation

in darkened theatre dotted with dim steplights  
where potato wafers perish as he grieves  
because already the vampire screen fright's

begun). instead dry scuff of dead neem leaves  
on terraced sandstone flags. and a single  
dazzling sunburst off the water bottle that leaves

a gooseflesh spinal tingle  
and a row of black eclipses on the retina  
where fear and darkened vision mingle

in stricken patina.

*the ghost*

heat off flagstones crimps the air,  
in silent insurrection lifts shin hair.

emaciated neem trees  
in stoic discourse fan a furnace breeze.

swifts stream from the guardhouse  
flicker a figure of eight mobius.

irv studies his split map side  
on. two xeroxed A4 sheets that slide

apart like twin beds  
on unlucky lovers.          better heads

than his don't know if this is  
jodha bai's palace (Akbar's missus)

or not. sweat drops laze  
proud on the page, transient glaze,

when suddenly he gawps—  
a mirage forming not ten feet off!—jaw drops

and as the ectoplasm coalesces (as ectoplasm can)  
into neither palm nor camel but preexistent man

the air fair crackles in a preternatural breeze  
so squirrels freeze with upright hackles.

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