

IRWIN ALLAN SEALY

From Zelaldinus

The following are excerpted from ***Zelaldinus***, Irwin Allan Sealy's forthcoming book-length sequence of poems. The sequence interleaves the 16th and 21st centuries and—reflecting on the ambiguous legacy of the emperor Akbar, the Great Mughal—makes them porous. It is set in Akbar's abandoned city of Fatehpur Sikri, near Agra. Panoramic, varied in style, form and tone, the poems fan out from a narrative spine: Irv, a tourist visiting Fatehpur Sikri, meets the ghost of emperor, aka Zelaldinus, and an Indian, Percival, longs for his Pakistani lover, Pax. The book is narrated in flashes and turns by a saint, Irv, Zelaldinus himself, Abu Fazl, Percival and others.

This excerpt is an Almost Island exclusive.

the ticket gate (21st c)

i take the royal palace by a side door
neither tradesman nor noble
but breakfasted touring petty bourgeois

in flying machine jeans and quo vadis sandals.
sketchbook true—but no camera to declare
only a genius for late rising and sundry foibles.

sun high grey t-shirt already clinging wet wet hair.
wattle earlobes damp refrigerated water bottle warm
ten rupee ticket wilting in my hand curling in wet air

its boggy bromo paper so slack and gorm
less it parts from the counterfoil without a ripple
when the gatekeeper tugs along the pro form

a perforation. no morsecode stipple
no tiny luscious enfilade from childhood rites
of passage where i stumble blind mute joyous cripple

in darkened theatre— dotted though it is with steplights—
potato wafers crepitating in trodden sheaves
in the deep pile carpet as the vampire screen frights

begin instead dry scuff of dead neem leaves
on red sandstone flags. and a single
dazzling sunburst off the pearlpet waterbottle that leaves

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

aphorisms of the king

- ~ i ll kill the man who slanders my bleeding saint with my bare hands
- ~ that line about redemption—run it past me again fatherwhatsyourname
- ~ this is one country—mine
- ~ then i ll marry her too
- ~ and her
- ~ look just go conquer sind i cant be everywhere at once
- ~ tell your king our painters are the sun
- ~ and our singers the moon
- ~ now— whos for a game of tag the leopard?
- ~ my supersubtle f m just close down the royal mint for a decade—simple!
- ~ ive 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
- ~ one more thing if all faiths are equally false does it follow that all are equally true?
- ~ we ll put the books here next to the armour
- ~ chamberlain this pillows much too soft!

letters (16th c)

being unlettered
his majesty

reverses the
written word

so when
a noble

at meat
put down

his dish
too near

a scroll
his majesty

had the
sub librarian

slipped

schoolmen

some day i ll show you he says to me
the schoolmen at their labours
(leading me past the princes academy)

grown men writing term papers
magicians turning books
into books— frankly id rather risk the souks miasmic vapours.

now over there you see the social cooks.
hunger theorists basting the fatted calf with flummery
and not one hungry man among them—not crooks

but on par with those chaps by the chummery.
activists. clowns you saw got up in motley. which
being thespians of rage steeped in mummery

—hoi! he stops himself and elbows me this is rich.
(we pause beside a line where doctor nurture
pegs out his little learning stitch by stitch)

now this sage here complete with cranial suture
they say he has a glass prospective
of wondrous power for winking out the future

but hearing—when refuted—conveniently defective
the din of conference and symposial clamour
drowning out irrelevant invective.

i took his mealy mouth out to dine at timurs
here and watched him squirm at our mofussil guise
the decor menu clientele the pinchbeck glamour

small town crappyola and then the flies
all bug the visiting purist as *india*
agonistes—judged always *huh* from the big appyola—dies.

look fuck these fellow travellers irv. i hear
the kitchens done some liver fry with raw
onions i could eat a horse a chihuahua done in beer.

just remember as you chew
our backwoods universities pullulate
because these guys have all moved jaw

so far afield as to mandibly dislocate.
while the dregs here wink and smile
our tan specialists surgically relocate

and shiver in boston town and london—and while
they mouth indic slogans lick ass and praise
our growing gdp (and sing songs of exile)

outsiders gloat over our sad malaise.
exile my dick! what keeps them there?
it makes me sick. whats in that temperate haze?

is it just the easy passage in and out? a cutprice fare?
or that handy global village death of nations cry?
losing your edge and finding the centre (naturally *there*).

but to *choose* to live with the look irv the double take the sigh
where the best they can hope for is villain
to indiana jones? where massa will always have them by

the short and curlies? thats craven irv craven!
even by our fallen standards thats debased. bid fair
irv is the job worth it? is it irwin!

show me a freer land show me sweeter air
than this at cowdusk—but then its always been outsiders
not bespoke indians and stowaways to there

who made us see whats right beside us
not this defaulting citizenry not fair
but foulweather friends from max mueller to mohandas.

besides western scholars still do the lions share
of serious work—their begleys delvoyes koches..
but these guys? i mean what keeps them there?

the loot? the armani suit? the porsches?
jesus irv (blessings on his holy name but by his rood)
id wear rags—id go stark naked—clip my moustaches

cut my throat! — i swear! read my dewlap. *still* i wd
endure that expensive guttercrawling except they creak
for us as if they lived here shared the common good

and bad. look i say go there great go seek
your fortune become that be
that write that glowing moment speak

your new land its bright unfolding history
write that thing set yourself free!
thats how it shd be with immigrants pakistani

greek roman esquimo—belong! put on that me.
why fly this sorry flag? i mean we mughal crew
shook off that turki dust dug in and ploughed *this* lea.

what keeps them there? damned if i know.
this one goes from chat show to chautauqua to chair
that one has a whole site complete with tortured photo..

not one of them—well maybe one—has paid his way.
that fatwa fellow. the rest doing a hitch hike
on the gravy train (injun end) while beavering away

at their bleeding c v for holy miriams sake!
what keeps them there? the footlight basking?
the thrill of being closer to the mike?

—but what forgive me irv for asking
(this politely not meaning to gain face
take liberties) do you do when youre tasking?

i blench and stammer in the wake the still moiling race
of his harangue. —i—i write your roy—
al highness. and he unlettered lets that cook a space

then turns and skewers my halfbaked loaf with—write what boy?
and im obliged to come clean and tender
—n novels highness nnamas and such toys

—a novelist! well well. tomorrow you shall render
proof spin us a taut yarn. or we ll have another door
bricked up here and whats more signposted— **returned to sender.**

the little finger of his majestys left hand
defies the stoutest sword arm in the land
how much mightier then the royal tongue
yea than a damascus sword!
the ink pen trembles to record
the merest smitch of his diurnal saying

—abul fazl p m

heartravishing sayings of HM

- ~ absolute zero is wider than true north by half
- ~ true north is farther than a neighbours wife
- ~ a neighbours ox eats twice the measure of thine own
- ~ east is east but measure your bread by the baking stone
- ~ people in stone houses shd not glaze to the south
- ~ the stolen mango is sweetest in a drought
- ~ east is south when the world leans on its elbow
- ~ the former light of the world got off his tiger (aiyyo)
- ~ the paper tiger shd beware the candle by the bed
- ~ in the country of the toothless is the best head
- ~ better a stale fish fry than a bad ghazal
- ~ (conjec) this poets a right pain in the abul fazl
- ~ neither can i (haha) [dismissing the following claim of grounds for divorce]:
majesty she cant sleep with the light on i cant read in the dark

sikri lullaby

do you never go beyond the mesh on your cradle.
do you never go beyond the slats on your cot.
do you never go beyond this threshold with the bolthole.
do you never go beyond the elephant gate.
do you never go beyond naubats hailing.
do you never go beyond chapter five.
do you never go beyond the knot of her drawstring.
do you never go beyond four wives.
do you never go beyond six daughters.
do you never go beyond the khyber pass.
do you never go beyond the black waters.
do you never go beyond the moons broad face.
do you never go beyond the hem of gods garment.
and i will love you all my days

departmental ditty

(for anshu vaish)

the archaeological survey of india (asi)
that ontological mouthful has bigger fish to fry

than you and me and naubat singh and sharmaji included
but smaller too or else we are egregiously deluded

from paleolithic arrowhead to marble taj mahal
every conceivable shape and size it catalogues them all

its briefs a tad ambitious not wholly practicable
but given the scale from minnow to whale its soundly demonstrable

the nation needs or else it bleeds a system of policing
monuments and tumulii that teem with modes of fleecing

the irrigation ministry has plans to flood that town
diverting streams so nymphs in stone—ten yakshis—with it drown

this hillock might prove stupa that the i v c
but the railway minister covets its bricks to line his holy see

starved for funds while the army bloats and the war drum it bangs on
by dentine or by hangnail the survey it hangs on

its learnt to keep its head down that's how you dig my brother
it knows that when it looks one way its back is turned the other

and so it paints a numeral on every piece of furniture
as each potsherd so every pin just routine nomenclature

a jealous eye on every stick a tab on all the bones
since god—or the devils—contractor has carted off the stones

you email dubdubdub.asi the clerk says send a fax
you telephone you know the boss ah then he says relax

but show your cause in duplicate he rounds to the attack
it helps you know the burra mem but let her catch the flak

what would we do without
what would we do without

the archaeological survey
the archaeological survey

of india (asi)

percival

percy stands just shy of tall. assam tea skin
hints at the high mongolian (why?) hair rough cut
and pushed back with long fingers. prognathic chin

that he sometimes neglects to shave. brooding jut
to the elkish upper lip a nibbling pout shared
too with the tropic cowfish. nose beaked mouth wide but

its taut horizon allows all kinds of weather. beard
(for now) and bushy brow hobnob in brighteyed gloom.
class three dental occlusion. build able bodied.

up from a pondy south that knows no cold hes come
unprepared. is wearing all his teeshirts at one go
under the cream shawl he got straight off a home loom

by the bus stand. so three rings—black white grey—show
at his neck. as his red beret crests sikri ridge
he looks like the painted crane. precise not slow.

straggler of the flock but soarer too. hostage
to love. grounded for now but happiest gliding
on thermals. not overgiven to verbiage.

confession

[father monserrate in gown and black biretta is pacing by the womens quarters practising restraint. his alabaster earlobes glow from the effort as he writes with one gaunt finger in the frosty air where his script hangs in wisps]

i fully believe the king inclines
towards our faith
and lacks but a dram
of persuasion to turn altogether
to the one true god.
your grace may expect results
[strike one]
by march/by july/by september/ by
and by—

[when suddenly a young man treads on his cassock]

monserrate my child where to in such haste?

percival good father can you guide me to the watergate?

m and whats your business there?

p my guidebook mentions a nooria—an aqueduct.

m a nooria! why we had those at home. his majesty has one here of
his own devising. but the watergate is bricked up. only such as i
can enter there. well go you past the executioner turn right and
follow the outer wall but not as far as the zenana for that way
lies temptation..

p i ll steer clear father and come back to you for confession if
thats all right.

m your mind is troubled son?

p a little father.

m you burn son?

p i burn father. for every beauty truth be told. but im lost to
one across the border.

m what border child?

p with pakistan.

m a country then?

p a fine country father but our enemy they say. yet the only one of theirs i ever met i loved.

m who is this child my son?

p a paki father born and bred.

m and what is she to you?

p no relation good father but promise of eternal peace and permanent arousal.

m where does she live?

p in karachi father.

m and where is that?

p the wrong side of the tracks father. twenty visa applications have come back.

m then how do you meet?

p online good father.

m ah yes ive heard of that. and you (como se?) chatter daily?

p [*with dignity*] chat father. nightly.

m these meetings are how shall i say virtual?

p sadly father.

m be it so until the nuptial day. go in peace my son.

p [*sotto voce*] say in pax father.

[*returning after some time*]

walled up as you say father. will you confess me now?
 —i) it wasnt wholly virtual and
 —ii) i dont hate pakis. am i queer?

m come back to me for the first. for the second you must render unto caesar child. and go the given way. the court of public audience lies there. do your obeisance to the king and ask his opinion. you have a petition?

p i have a ticket.

m let me see. [*examines it*] i fear this free line will not do with the king. entree comes dressed more formally in these parts.

p too true father. i found the freest man of all in sikri fallen on sonneteering.

m ah the saint! a man most godfearing. the cold does curious things. God will forgive him three cold sonnets. could you not try some plainer schema?

p not terza rima!

m why not? here let me remix it. there! go join the throng in the diwan-i aam. your turn will come. today the king judges—or rather his elephant does—criminals. so beware!
theres a stone hassock below the throne where you must on no account rest your head. do you see the food taster there by the executioners gate—too late! no matter. here is some europe petitioner. follow him.

golightly

(after thomas coryate who walked to india in 1613)

madgesty
this is terence golightly gentyman
hath walked from england to see thee.

bringing no bounty from his quean
no costly jewel no mechanic trinketry
but only his yeoman heart and legges lean
to set before thy august self on bended knee

and heartfelt assurance that his people will
naught but gode to our own people.
though our cruel neighbours heere did use him ill
caring no figge for crucifix or steeple.

once robbed twice beaten left for dead
relieved of eye pod and camera digitalis
nathless of gode chere and sound head.
his collar no lytle motheaten withal his

codpeece the worse for daily goad.
mayhap he h@h ytales to tell
of cyber wonders met upon the road
mayhap some old alchemyc spell

for the manufactory of gold
or gunpowder. wherefore he beggeth
hospitality and wode make bold
ere forlorn homeward he leggeth

to narrate (in english it is true but matched
by mimic feats) whensoever yr madgesty
shd please hairraising tales new snatched
from myth reality show and travesty.

here he be in costume something threadbare
his lonlye plannete bosom-clutcht but shoon
no lytle down at heel and all headbare.
he is at pains to mark him no buffoon.

a game of bowles he hath already taught
involvyng bat and paddes and wickets three
(being eke much exercizd of sweaty sport)
to twice eleven yong roisterers of squiri.

no creeping missionarie he. enthusiast
instead of gastronomie meanyng no greater sin
than to convert this nacion to such repast
as spotid dyk toad in the hole and thin

gravy. wherefore gode king in goddes name
the great the merciful who shines alike
on besse and uqbar of commensurate fame
grant shelter to this wayward pallid shrike

els he wode have no option but
to figure smalle in bolyewode
playing seconde soldier tommy redcote
or lecherous teaplanter spode.

the well

dug
by
a
man
of
the
chalwanji
caste
who
plaits
a
kundali
rope
of
grass
and
winds
it
round
and
round
shoring
up
the
walls
as
he
goes
and
when
hes
gone
youre
let
down
ankle
roped
to
hang
there
swaying
upside
down
voiding
your
head
one
with
the
dark

turning

daylight robbery

will you be lying there some morning sir

thinking *imustgettowork*

theempireneedsme

and then you think

of her?

trains

what are trains like dreaming perce?
asks the king.
they glide like etiquette sir
through halls of gleaming protocol
flash past liquid crystal lights and draw up at distant portals
to cities of plate glass
and never stop for ordinary mortals.
trains are class.

what are trains like dreaming percy?
asks the priest.
they glide like grace father
on rails that meet at the horizon
all who ride them must show a ticket that says shriven
or face eternity in prison
for they never stop till they arrive in heaven.
trains are extreme unction.

what are trains like dreaming persia?
asks the saint
they jolt like disillusion baba
board them with caution
and shd you begin to enjoy the ride its just temptation
get off and walk no matter if youre sick or well
for the next stop surely is damnation.
trains are hell.

we ll tell you what trains are like dreamy percival
say the gang of four
they glide like vultures percival
bars on the windows blood on the track
convoy of carrion crows cross dressed in black
dead guard in the last carriage
who never stops to pick up widows.
trains are carnage.

what are indian trains like waking perce?
asks his paki woman.
they ride like skin on skin woman
like ours last night
no different from your trains same red light and green flag
same shitty toilet same unchanging fare
same penalty stop chain.
trains get you there.

then why do they stop at the border crabby percy?
nags percys woman.
ask all that lot above woman.
buggered if i know why they stop at the border.
planes are better.

pak train

gazing out the bogey door
at green fields racing past

you are my beautiful woman

pissing down a black hole
in the indian style toilet

you are my beautiful woman

eating the air? grins the railway cop
i look full in his raddled face

you are my beautiful woman