Delhi to Chandighar (A Poem)

On the train to Chandighar, Saturday 7.40 a.m. express EC executive class, separate from ordinary first class, a four-hour ride for less than twenty bucks in an air-conditioned car, my fellow passengers, all Indian but me, sit in collared shirts, dresses, saris, and modern leisure wear; a plump young couple sport the newest shock-absorbing running shoes.

An attendant in starched white shirt and navy epaulettes with gold ensigns serves us a bottle of mineral water, the Hindustan Times, and tea. A row behind me, a lady in multi-colored designer glasses and a flowing purple business dress talks in her cell phone in a high, accomplished British air: “What happened at UNESCO yesterday?... Any good Indian nominations?... And... Sir John Cook!... Oh excellent. Oh wonderful.”

The train starts and we edge past the first shanty by the tracks. Multi-colored trash flows down the bank plastered to the mud in the wet heat like an immense wedding cake that lost its shape, washed out in the rain. Men, women and children, thin and of darker cast, appear from piecework shacks of mishmashed boards and poles that rig yellow, blue and taupe plastic tarps and corrugated metal sheets. They sit or move listless in the press of heat.

The server brings packaged pairs of sliced white industrial bread and cornflakes, and then returns to pour steamed milk.

We pass green fields, men and women bowed barefoot in the oozy mush, pulling and binding tall, green rice shoots. In the row before me, a man reads his Hindustan Times: “No problem with porn, says Kate Hudson,” smiling, “her husband likes it.” We enter another settlement by the tracks, its trash spewing into basins where the rain collects. An old man drops his loincloth and craps; a pig trolls; a cow’s ebony hide glistens. “Would you like veg or non-veg?” “What’s non-veg?” “An omelet.” We slide through another station, a billboard welcoming, “Milk Time: Serving a healthy life.” Men sit on their haunches, buttocks a centimeter from the ground like on a swing — still, silent. Passengers in a stalled local train lean their heads out the windows for a trace of breeze, dark eyes drained. “For juice, mango, pineapple or orange?” Rich fields again; the landscape rolls like a film; a lone chimney rises from a kiln; two boys swim their cows across the black water of a ditch; white egrets fish. Behind me, two women speak of MBAs and PHDs, comparing schools — “oh it’s much more difficult to get in than Oxford.” Men wade the fields, their arms from sack to air casting seed. A cell phone sing song rings. A young woman types names in a laptop from her boss’s business cards. “Announcement. We are approaching Chandighar station.”

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