



IMAGES OF INDIA

H. S. Toshack

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H S Toshack

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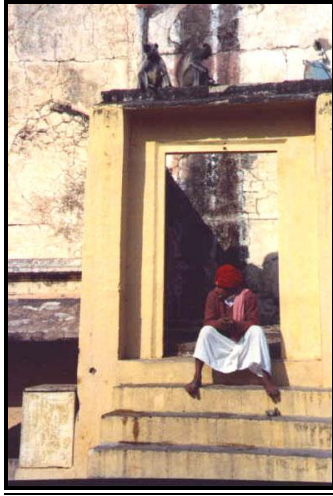
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Writing Travel Poetry

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The Doorway and the Road

In the illusion of a doorway
Sits a dreamer of a man
With his hands clasped together
And his mind grasped around a thought –
Not, as with us (too often)
Of plans that have come to nought,
Of what ought to have been done
And has not.
Instead...

(How do I know,
You ask,
What he's got in his head?)

I've watched him for a while
And seen a smile
Lift the corners of his mouth.)

...Instead of picking at his cares
Like the monkeys on the lintel above and behind
Scratching for fleas
He rests his elbows on his knees
Folds his hands
And holds tight in his mind
The memory of places where he once lightly strode,
To which he might
If he wished
Stride now
Down the reality of a road.



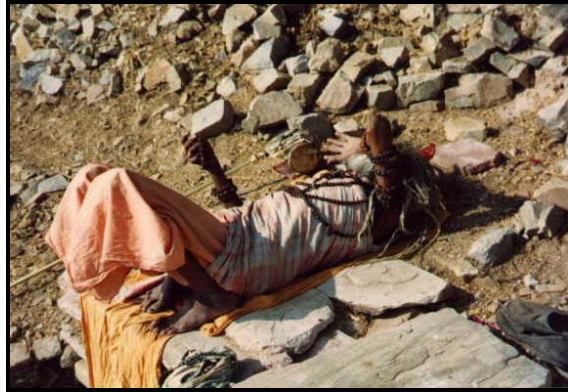
The Amber Fort

The view through the arch is no great shakes,
Nothing that takes your breath away –
A scrubby shoulder of a shapeless hill
(Not very high)
With a tower on top
Against a background full of faded sky.

And when you step forward to the balustrade
Lean out
And look down
There isn't much to shout about there, either,
There isn't much of a town,
Just a teeter of shops
Along the wide and dusty road,
And a few houses
With a muddy stream beside:
Jaipur petered out a few miles back
And the Amber City died a long while past.

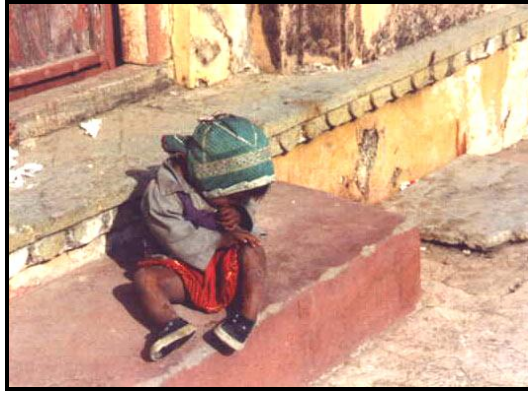
Those dull houses will last
While the slow and muddy stream still runs,
While the tourist money
Your money from whatever you've bought
Having clambered up here
Trickles down the hillside from the Amber Fort.

There's a thought, now:
What was made to guard the Amber Palace below
Has outstayed it
And stands alone.
The life
(Once famed, then become jaded)
That was lived down there
Is gone,
And all that is left is a faded landscape
Framed in yellow stone.



Holy Man

He's between some rocks and a dark place.
The cistern on the edge of which he sleeps
Is a hole where he could hide
Into which he might slide
If the sun became too bright,
Its touch too strong,
The day too long,
The shouts of the world too loud
Or its doubts too much,
And the rocks started to roll.



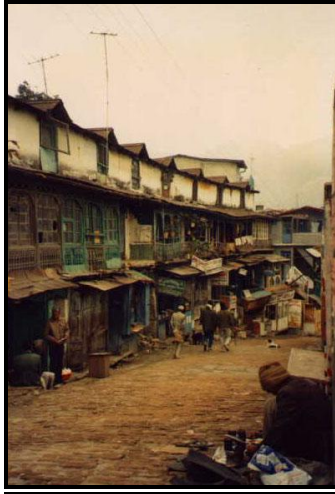
The Last Shot on the Roll

You can just about tell what she's looking at,
This little tot.
She must not have sat there long –
You can see from the pee
Which has run down the dust on her legs
And dries now in the strong morning sun.

I'm glad I saved this shot
For something special.
The Peacock Gate is very fine;
And I caught on film
The line of silk-adorned elephants
That carried us here
From the town below.
(There'll be other things to capture
As we sag, trundle and sway back down:
I'll leave that to the people in raptures
Over the shrine behind me.)

I'm glad I tarried when the others moved on,
Chose not to go to the shrine
And lagged behind.
Where I have been carried today
I have seen nothing as lovely as this,
Nothing which has stirred my mind and senses so.

But nor can I find in my camera bag,
Among my too many lenses,
An accessory to give me an image
As sharp as the one
This bundle of a child
This rag of a girl
Now holds in her head
Of her curled fingers,
The folds in her skirt
And the pee which lingers in the dirt on her legs
And dries in the hot morning sun.



Down the Sloping Street

These totterdown shops and houses
Tumble towards the Nainital lake;
And the people too
In this uncertain place
Barely awake
And bundled to the face against the early mountain cold,
Holding close their warmth,
Stumble down the sloping street
To the stretch of open air
On this side of the lake
Where they can stare across the wide water
To the jumble of houses and shops
On the other side,
Hoping to find them still there.



Boat Sunk in the Shallows

The winters are long in Nainital,
The black lake waters
In winter
Are heavy, cold and still.
When, on dark winter days,
The heavy wet snows
Sweep down from the High Himalayas
And the chill water seeps in
Through a chink in your boards,
It's easy to fill, and sink.

Yet you don't so much sink as settle
In the shoals of the Nainital lake
Where the water is not black but green
And the bed of the lake is soft
So there's no fear of a hole.

And the others have stayed afloat.
There's no real risk for a boat here,
Near the shores of the Nainital lake
Where the water is green.
Summer will come again,
The tourists will come again,
A boat can be raised again, painted,
And pointed out at the middle of the lake,
Ready.

They are heady days
When the Nainital summer comes again.
People in bright clothing stroll round the lake
In the morning,
And in the evening,
In the evening breeze,
The lights in the trees
The strings of coloured lights in the trees round the lake
Sway gently
And the waters eddy gently
And you swing gently here
At your mooring.

But your loathing of the middle of the lake
(Where the water is not green
Where the water is black)
Does not leave you.
And you know that come winter
Come the wet snow from the high mountains
You should not stray to the middle of the lake,
Surely you must stay in the shallows of the lake,
Or suffer a sinking that no raising will cure.



The Peacock Throne

Once it was locked inside:
The throne that shone at the heart of things
Must be peeked and pried for
Through filigree screens
Which misted the eye of the looker
So he could not see
To the centre of things.

Now anyone can enter,
And the fact is out,
Must be faced, cannot be denied:
The place is bare,
And what, once,
Could not be seen from outside
Is no longer there.

There was nothing much to hide
Once they'd stolen the Peacock Throne,
Nothing much at all –
Some bits of mirror and coloured glass
Set in the bone-white wall.

Outside in the wide air and the open land
The filigree screen
Of the bone-bright sun
Mists the eye of the seeker
So that he cannot clearly see.
But the fact is all too plain
That many other precious things
Which once were there
Have also gone.



The Grain Merchant

At the end of the day
What happens to the grains and beans
That have spilled to the ground?
There must be some:
The mounds are too high,
The baskets filled too full
And a scoop will start a slide
And lead to a patter
As the piles are eroded.

I doubt he'll decide it doesn't matter,
Regard them as lost,
Bag the rest and go.

Those that have dropped on the cloth below
He will shake together.
Those on the earth will be taken up
And tossed with the rest:
He will find them all.

Tonight
By oil-lamp light
He will be at pains to pick apart those that fell,
And drop each back into its proper sack,
Ready to be loaded on his cart.
None will be left unassigned.

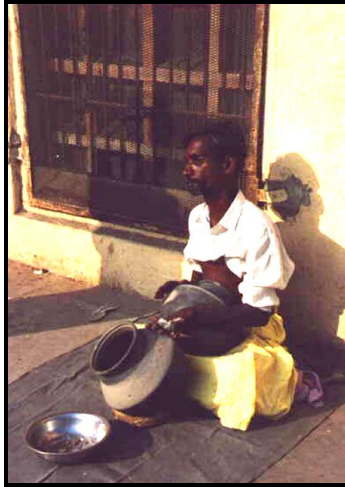
But the light will be dim
And so, you can see,
(Even though his hands are steady and his fingers deft)
Are his eyes;
And size and shape alone are not enough to tell.
That's alright:
The grains
And the beans,
You can also see,
Are colour-coded.



The Peacock Gate

I don't know whether I'm right
And I'd hate to get it wrong:
I think this is the Peacock Gate,
But why I couldn't say
(Why Peacock not why think, I mean)
Since although the deco's fine
(The whole thing's a work of state)
The paint isn't blue but green with a touch of pink
And there's no sign
No sheen
Of feathers.

Maybe, when you're a prince,
Strutting's what it's all about,
Putting on the style,
Seeming to be more than you are,
Sailing out through a door like this
Trailing people like plumes
With nothing amiss if they drag in the dirt
So long as they're alert
To the twitch of your turbaned head
Which tells them they must shake off the dust
Fan out gleaming behind you
And cover your butt.



Blind Drummer

He strokes and taps and beats his drums
(Just brass pots),
And to the strong and sombre rhythm
Sings a song in his head
Of what he has got in his gleaming bowl
And how long it will last
If he stops his drumming.

Not long.

He also dreams in his darkness, though...
His burnished bowl is full of coins
And he pours its store into the smaller pot in his lap
(Silencing it),
Sets that on the mat before him,
And takes and strokes and taps the bowl instead.

When the coins in the pot top its rim
He stops once more,

Tips its load into the larger vessel
And moves that to the fore
To take the giving.

When that larger one is full
The smaller pot goes back on the ground
And he has only the bright bowl
Now behind
To make his sound,
To make his living.

And all the while,
As first (in his mind)
The bowl then the pots slowly fill
With glistening coins,
What comes from his hands
Is a lighter music,
Still worth the listening.

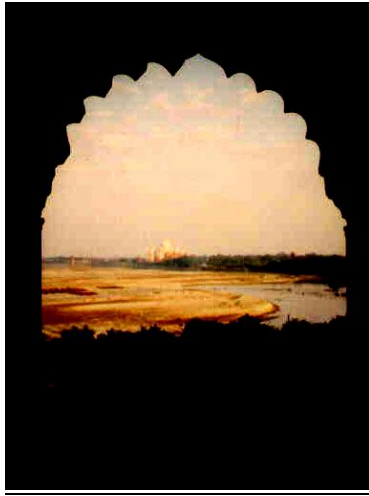


Corbett National Park

But I must dry the wood for it to burn,
Must lay it this way and that
Turn and turn about
And watch the stains too slowly shrink,
The rain that soaked in overnight
Steam slowly out;
So that what is burnt in the fireplace
Goes to dry the fuel I have leant against the flames,
What is spent in the fireplace merely scorches out the remains of the storm;
And I must wait to get warm.

I got cold in the first place
Stumbling early through dank bushes and dripping ferns
Looking for branches to burn
On this wet Christmas day.
As Janet has said,
It might have been better
To stay in bed.

I have little hope that the tigers we have come to see
Will view things any differently.



The Taj Seen From Afar

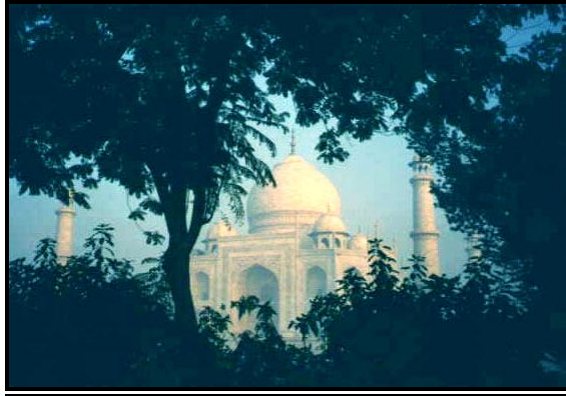
Which is how we all see it
Until of course we come close;
For words fall short
And photos do not suffice.

There's an argument for keeping your distance
In any case:
We can all find it hard living up to a claim,
To what people have said,
To what they have heard.
And it's the same for a place
When it's put to the test:
Blurred and far is sometimes best.

As we drove out that day
From where we were staying
I didn't know what I'd feel

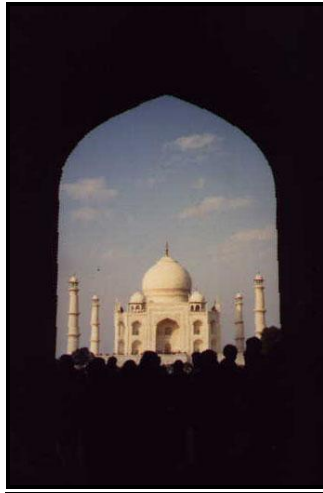
Or what I'd end up saying
When we got there.
Being a tough unsentimental type,
I thought I'd find myself griping
At the hype,
The pose,
The bluff of the thing:
I can't bring myself to believe in eternal love,
Union beyond death,
And all such dubious stuff.

So I was pleased to pause a mile away
Above the river plain
And see the Taj through the summer gauze
For fear that when we came near
The sweetness would be too much,
Or not enough.



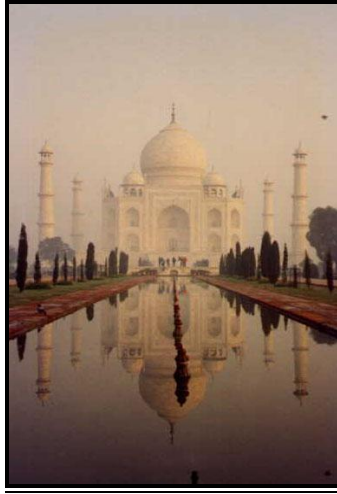
The Taj Glimpsed Through Trees

Or, a white shell seen through dark weed and sea-sway
In the depths of a jagged pool.
Loath to trust its loveliness
You must plunge your arm through the soft warm water
And slow black fronds
To take it in your hand,
Hard and smooth and cool.



The Taj Seen Above Heads of People...

...Longing to see the tomb,
Who have thronged to see the tomb
But choose not to pass the portal
And stand instead
Before a lit canvas in a darkened room
Slow to step forward
Lest they bruise themselves
Against the glass.



The Taj Seen in Water

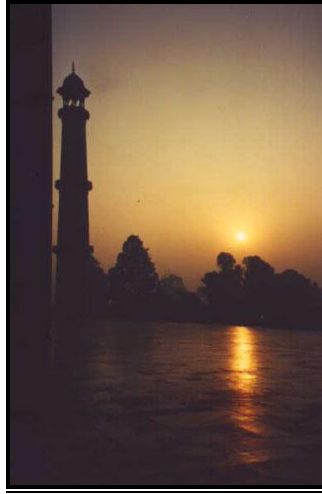
The reflection
Is sharper than the source
The picture than the object
And the image in our minds
Than the thing itself.

On the other hand,
The building may stand higher than the feeling
The execution be clearer than the design
And the marble harder than the desire.

Those were early days.
So how
As we gaze out now
From the length of the perimeter wall

Can we measure the strength of the love that built
What seems to be this shrine,
Luminous as pearl?

Our eye
At this early hour
Follows the fading line of the pool
Into the pall of an early morning haze;
And even a dove must doubt
Tilting high with the dawn behind it
To a tall white tower,
Whether it dare land
On what it may find
Was never there at all.



First Light at the Taj Mahal

The tower stands like a lighthouse
Dark against the dawn
And the sun rises over a marble sea.

I had planned to propose as it went down last night
But the gates were shut at close of day
For fear of bombs
And we could not come near.

That is why we are here now instead
Having left our bed betimes
To see the sun climb slowly above these cool calm waters
And the tower like a lighthouse stark against the sky.

And that's fitting, I would say.
I have asked and been answered.
This is the beginning of a new journey
And a new day.