

# HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF IN PARADISE

by

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This thesis combines two poetic manuscripts into one coherent and readable volume. It builds on the freewheeling, hallucinatory flow of the poets whose work served as primary influences during its composition, chief among them Allen Ginsberg, Dylan Thomas, Walt Whitman and Arthur Rimbaud. This work breaks new ground in the exploration of the effects of world travel upon the consciousness of the author. Instead of descriptions of the places and people encountered while journeying about the world the work explores the unique mental and emotional arenas inhabited as consequence of travel's influence upon the individual. The work is infused with both narrative and lyrical verse, a format well suited to getting the volatile nature of world travel onto the page. Each of the pieces are titled with the names of the cities in which they were initially composed, except for the final poem, a 6300-word epic concerning journeys both in South America and Asia.



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A Thesis

Presented To the Faculty of the Department of English

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Master of Arts in English, Concentration Creative Writing

by

David Johnson

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## Shangri-La

Asia's demons degrade from icon to artist,  
Balk at being lost to history by lesser names  
    & in time mature into the sleeping dogs they lacked the sense to let lie;  
Rotteners harried by wasted lives foretold,  
All ears, all fears & all frailties for any Alexandria,  
    so long as the grave resists its welcome—  
For Byzantium wreathed in militant anonymity  
Anatolia bled damned as in demand  
Yerevan sobbed out on the things that keep it manic  
Tehran whose death would settle all disputes  
    if the least of the world's losers would disappear;  
Palmyra crucified with fortune's hangnails  
Jerusalem split to ashes for satisfied minds  
Medina for one day all will be explained  
    but until then its word will do;  
Ashgabat hammered by reproductive hovels,  
    Ulaan-Bataar by cremation mistakes,  
    Darvaza by caviar typhoons  
Karachi sponged from the grindhouse  
Silk Road retraced for the mediocrities who'll inherit the earth  
Bishkek whose youth was over the minute it tried to think of experience  
    as the ultimate recreational drug;  
Colombo because nobody goes there  
Mandalay for the beard as killing field  
Lhasa bone-deep in neutered witch-hunts  
Thimphu gurgling through servants' chokeholds  
Maharashtra skulking to halfwit burial grounds  
Kandahar raiding drunk tanks for exorcism stand-ins  
Pyongyang sloughing off monstrosity hopscotch  
Borneo shredding glass-eye chandeliers  
Queensland slurring date-rape mating calls;  
Melanesia steered to gargoyle orchards,  
    Komodo to blotted epitaphs,  
    Port Moresby to dreidels in frying pans;  
Sumatra wreathed in jelly-walled nursing wards,  
Socotra in moistened axes,  
    Samoa in sands white as slaves' eyes  
Easter Island by ash-heaps of history  
Atlantis by sanity of developing planets  
Land of Nod by the sense still fit to plunder  
Civilization by one who dies a violent death  
    & rests with money in the heart



## **Hanoi**

A thousand desecrated wastelands,

I have known them all—

Groomed them sharpened birth defect to hysterical blindness

Warped and broken their savior days' deformities & blistered jewels;

The cement brainwaves, test-tube torture devices

& inspirational killing machines

Of wizened antichrists who call their spastic breeding grounds home—

Those depths of barbarism where cheated features shrill through razor waves

to bleed the cripplingly sane

Of cruelty our species remains as loath to live out

as it is to steer its' victims

To states of bestial grace

darker than any lost-faith catalyst

Any Lights Beyond Annihilation

Any clubbed womb blackened as the shells

of those who marvel at the terror

That there are as many ways to lose your soul

as there are to reject the truth

about yourself

## Yangshuo

In Yangshuo snuffed bloodhounds run afoul of Christendom

Earthlings stray from man-sized hamster wheels

& scab collectors farm kittens out to hormone parties—

Crop-circle baldness sprouts halfwit crowns

Eunuchs' boot tantrums collapse the world stage

Class warfare pits marriage material against ice cream salesmen in wolves' clothing

& lack of love for children is the one thing the tramps don't have

in common with Hitler—

Hunchbacks swill cobra-heart cocktails

Noose sensualists compare popcorn lung

Sterilization hopefuls peel scars from botched scalpings

Marksmen dip paper clips in liver spots

Former primates rant at robot next of kin

& shrinks die winking with the wrong hand clapping

As Yangshuo spits up every genus of the indispensable,

Growing fat off those for whom the neutron

bomb was patented

## **Penang**

Long-stalked shadows of easy prey  
Slandered enough to seek Malaysia's reckonings;  
To love it after more lifetimes of six weeks  
    than the deviant will ever disown  
As long as it's still messiahs,  
    live-birth condolences  
    & recreational bloodthirst  
Beaten into the groundlings  
    until laughing in the face of death  
    is the new navel-gazing  
Until the caged bird has as short a shelf life  
    as happy childhoods  
Until the inmates strip the guards  
    of second skins  
Cast off for peanuts,  
    for a song,  
    for a cost of fortune  
Gnawed by killers lynched for kicks  
    in the nowheres of no return  
Whose chain-gangs bleat cradle wails  
    to hydrant-sized strains of the human disease;  
Wallflowers on criminality's stillborn edge,  
Living proof that the eccentric goes the way of the good man  
    in as record a time  
    as the recluse

## **Dali**

Allergens, octopus ice cream  
    & scorpion birthday cakes  
Rock painters naked for the wrong reasons  
Non-halal human stains,  
    phantom-limb fever dreams,  
        kosher slaves, bloodlines & sperm banks—  
In a Yunnan whose thugs demand facelifts for ransoms  
    Gravy-train salesmen square-dance with chairs  
    Maidens' switchblades stick to hands of sodomites  
    Chefs refuse funerals for lefties,  
        skeptics  
        & known paranoids  
Execution equipment experts auction blunted guillotines,  
    doctored iron maidens  
        & radioactive lottery tickets;  
Human-soap salesmen bathe in exploding cigars,  
    Contortionists in razor wire,  
    Playboys in replica mangers,  
    Perfumed pigs in melted elephant tumors,  
    Orgy specialists in holy-water hot-springs,  
    Bored angels in nerve agents,  
    Indigents in eternal-truth trust funds,  
        Tax cheats in Assyrian skull collections,  
    Delinquents in greased string beans,  
    Man-child apologists in seventh adolescences—  
A Yunnan whose plagiarists nickname slaughterhouses,  
    Seminarians floss with blood-tipped darts  
        & sages humor former selves' reflections yet claim they cannot see  
        what's right in front of them—  
Dali crumbling as the septic grindhouse it's coddled long enough  
    to mime its fall from grace,  
Courting every grope at fear it made  
    deserve  
    itself

## **Bangkok**

There is nothing amenable  
to human empathy  
about  
Bangkok—

Bangkok is a decrepit predator,  
So forged from disdain even the least of beggars  
would scorn its company  
One who contrived the torments of the damned  
& remains their most ruthless exponent;  
The whiplash specialist you'll thank  
for giving you the face you deserve—

A rot opera spurred to bastardize the hellbound,  
only in tears when it's salted every call of the void;  
Apostate of the poorly tuned inferno it frets to perfect  
for its inhabitants  
Who cheats the truth we all pretend  
we're ready to suffer;  
One that would fuck you and leave you wanting more,  
if it deemed you worthy;  
but instead  
just leaves you  
wanting  
more

## Shanghai

The land where logic comes to dry out,  
to die,  
to tax its welcome long enough to claim it's here to stay,  
Begging the city to remain as it was to see what it is—  
A clown-school shanty with nothing to call its own  
& all the smoker's coughs in the world to call for it,  
Nothing to profane but failed-god kilns in which to reinvent  
its model horrors,  
All the shredded grandeur that matters to parody  
& savagery upon savagery to redefine—  
One militant eccentricity hatched unto  
a braided wart of a continent,  
Ready with the whip for the minds it ravages,  
the souls & spirits it subverts  
& the breakdowns it orchestrates;  
O Shanghai,  
dear brother,  
I salute  
thee

## **Bagan**

The heart reflects  
from frosted crossroads  
From teeth of idols,  
graveyard hanging gardens,  
winged lepers bludgeoned to the least of ravers' havens  
Shirks apologies for germicides from whence it sprang,  
was wrestled into submission,  
was buried and raised again,  
Glow through straw men's law of the jungle  
saving table scraps for those who let it die,  
Slaves for derangements as the monster  
too mature for us to be the world's bastards for ignoring,  
Sings to cheat the hangman for the number  
of times it's been the end  
Swills radium in the psyche's ransacked annexes  
as the witch-trial revivalist it's grown into;  
The pinned minotaur whose fighting blood's as up  
as instant fame,  
With a loathing of being asked,  
even as the victor,  
whether or not it ever  
told the truth

## **Kathmandu**

Black & tan Babylon,  
Tending the light at the end  
of easy living's tunnels  
For us more virginal emissaries of the human-loon sub-species  
it took our coming here to realize we played so gallant a part,  
Yet cannot renounce as its clawed us as deep as the demons  
are digging  
And carved out a haunt we can never allow it to flee,  
For if we do then what dies in us is the very thing  
that invited it in,  
And there's as much coming back from that  
as there is from the certainty that maybe you never really  
wanted it there,  
But now you're too old to kid yourself and the naysayers' arrows  
do naught but numb the nervous  
breakdown alarms  
That can't be sopped after,  
groveled to,  
prayed away  
Or nourished as the plague these streets evoke in all who let it  
flourish as the bitch in heat who tames  
the Ugly American



## Palawan

Small-time human stains who hate to live uncorrupted  
the way the common hate to die  
with secrets

Yet whose quest to save themselves remains delayed  
for lack of audience—

Child prodigies in the theatre of self-deceit  
as too cool for quality of life as they'd been  
for school,

The mere thought of them enough to make kids not want to grow up  
& the actual sight to make them refuse altogether—

Fell companions with faces like dehydrated  
pumpkin carvings,

Drafted to assassinate morality but forget to name  
the killer;

Starved for olive branches of fantasy lives  
they never lived down long enough  
to renounce,

Nursing the misery impulse that follows nightmares  
from which one is unwilling,  
not *unable*,

to scream

As love of life comes as late  
as love of self

## Taipei

I stood graveyard shifts in tears  
of Little China's clowns  
Spying craziness void of charm  
Isolation without the immunities  
Cabin fever sans skull drudgery  
Fates tailored for tortured minds—  
Crucifixions wrought by hitmen a lazy suicide  
from immortality,  
Reformed optimists with strangled eyes on midnights  
of the soul,  
Ghouls running death-to-birth hurdles in fallow gas chambers,  
Writ large not as voices crying in the wilderness  
but the most quotable groans  
from solitary—  
Goat herders staff burn-victim harems  
with pawns unfit to lick the boots  
of dead men walking,  
Rented infants fill out worlds of terror within  
the way ghosts inhabit houses children cross the street to avoid,  
whisper of in hushed tones  
& forget to dare each other to spend a night inside because they know  
not even the bullies will do it—  
Bastard masses blighted by the lion tamer's brand  
of whiplash,  
Screaming clam-hearted agonies  
for death or irrelevance  
Until the most shriveled sins of solitude  
became the ultimate guide  
to being a decent guy—  
Life on earth crushed in its last of hiding places,  
Left to root out any token resistance, even that mounted to confirm  
that the ideal man is he who continues trying  
even though he knows  
there is no  
hope

## Saigon

Here lies a champagne socialist of a failed state  
As many hand-me-down death tolls from desolation  
    as it is questioned body counts from paradise  
Whose calculated souls snarl karma in kissing distance to the bottle  
As do the healer, the dealer & the young crazed peeler,  
    all whom Uncle Ho marches among;  
The browbeater, the wasted seeder,  
    & the guy who humps  
        parking meters;  
The meal ticket, the creature effects,  
    the hymenites,  
Everyone but the cheaters,  
    none of *them* are here;  
No maverick fatalists debased enough for lap-dog duty  
    at that great & bottomless trough from which all zealots  
        slurp with such aplomb,  
Where shipwrecked ransoms  
    meet sleep-tonic terrorism  
        meets lives worth combing  
            the grave  
In this ghost-town retreat for fleshbound shrapnel ill-disposed  
    to an outside world they long ceased to recognize  
Talking 'saloons' instead of 'biergartens,'  
    'pink-shopping' in place of 'harem-quaking,'  
        & 'honored tramps' rather than 'detectives'  
To seal a seen-it-all stature as in & out of as many primes  
    as whatever sobriety speaks to them that hour,  
Ablaze in rock-bottom beds of roses  
    too thrashed by drought to harvest  
        the thorns  
Of degradation so deep that,  
    were they to sink no further,  
Rising again would be as catastrophic  
    as total collapse

## Lijiang

Nightmare reincarnated—

In corpses plumped by speckled flesh

In death rows scrubbed from demolition blueprints

In hysteria left to blister until its sores are ready to cook;

As free will fetishists glower from the photogenic sides  
of simplemindedness,

Weary enough of the world to join the ranks of those  
whose tragic flaw is living better with hatred than others;

As strapped legions drag marshes where ideals would lie  
were they made for chains

For common-prayer melancholy  
that frustrates the shoelace universe  
beyond the mountains of the sun

Where piggish mystics spurn the cosmic swindle's relics of dimstore brilliance  
in seclusion beyond the farthest star,

Soon to be spun out before the firing line & conned out of whatever recourse  
to the lost childhood they made their pact  
with the devil to preserve;

As locusts quake in padded trunks

As Christ's disgust remains as boneless as his innovations

As time inverts assassins' last resorts for common sense

And returns with moon-June-spoon barbarities  
cribbed from future terror lullabies of the violently enlightened

With glee-club requiems thawed for trial by ordeal

With dog-and-pony meltdowns clipped by generations  
fractured out of conscience but yet to make  
the final, bloody break

## Manila

Never & in no place did I humor such first responders to debauchery  
as in Manila—

There were puckish bucks & troubled love's defeatists,

Jewel thieves with the rage of the groin,

Geriatrics who found cities of alcoholism brick

& left them marble,

Even better ones who turned mud huts of drunkenness

into gilded space stations,

Landlords who defined the difference between men who were merely imperfect

& men who were consciously murderous,

Quack polymaths who refrained from judging others

in favor of telling them who they were,

Thirty-year-old diet gurus whose resumes showed a lifetime

work experience of 8½ months,

Amputees with elephantiasis of the unused

portion of the brain;

Parole officers who lacked higher functions,

Morticians with phlegm that could melt dead planets,

A diabetic with a weakness for three-year-olds,

West Virginia's most profligate narcoleptic,

Thimblewang, the tragicomic companion to many

a feckless princeling,

Cheeko who'd left Belgian groupies

in Belgian garbage cans,

Cuddleston, nabbed in Tijuana with a human palm

in a shaving kit,

Lord Spiderdown of Frankfurt-on-the-Main, whose better angels helped ants

complete hills,

Creeping Tom, tamed by a penectomy,

Kaboodle Detcalf, more five-fingered eyeball than man,

Slippery Richard, banned from Manhattan for doing something

wrong with his mouth,

Dog lovers who'd taken as long to learn to hate the human race

as they'd taken to tie their shoes;

Many with the vibe of a dormant crematorium,

the halitosis of a jackal

& the moxie of an honor killing,

Many more with the character of a hostage crisis,

the body odor of a burning condom

& the mating instincts of a chupacabra,

Still others with the social grace of the *other* guys in police lineups,

Lesser figures who displayed not one of these symptoms

but were made to wish they did;  
Pobie who'd smelled children's hands for thirty years; real salt of the earth kind of guy,  
McKitten the euthanasia consultant; he, too, was a family man,  
Big George, the kind of cracker who *shouldn't* be killed  
before he changes,  
The Most Honest Man In Asia, who claimed women castrate with silence,  
then said that great words are their own words of encouragement,  
The Last Honest Man In Asia, who claimed women are never honest until they marry the wrong  
man,  
then said if you're lucky words will be the worst thing you ever have in your mouth  
so get 'em out while you can,  
The Only Honest Man in Asia, who claimed women look as bad in wedding dresses  
as they do in workout clothes,  
then said to give him the words of the Lord lest he profane the world  
with his own,  
A graybeard claiming no title who said  
that wisdom if earned by wasted youth is never  
entirely conscious,  
A bankruptcy attorney who jumped up and down brushing his teeth  
asking when it was time to fumigate the manta rays,  
Harry the cat killer who'd hacked his way through Darien on foot in four days  
& said it was nothing  
but fled Caracas on hearing what he thought was a gunshot  
though never found out for sure;  
Slovenian wrestlers with beerguts older than teenagers,  
Slovenian wrestlers who flopped the beerguts in question,  
Slovenian wrestlers who in spite of this still considered themselves  
the most finely tuned athletic machines alive,  
Vigilantes who idolized chicken farmers,  
Suit salesmen who lamented the extinction of slavery,  
Owl-call experts who threw darts at prayer-group rosters  
to identify their victims,  
House painters to whom it'd been too long a day to plan the perfect murder  
& a Don Juan who stared into space all day long to see if he'd ever be capable  
of unconditional love—  
Every one of them a bleat of conscience  
shy of a sanity radar,  
So evolved as to shame the devil  
without even having to tell  
the truth

**Leshan**

There are more ways to say your youth is over  
than there are to revel in it as it abides;  
To scapegoat its misspent hours  
with more devotion than nostalgia can exhaust  
To prod its once & future selves  
as shrews of old replaced the eye among the blind—  
And as many ways to scourge its embers from whatever road  
the past allows to lead to the same ending  
As there are to lure it back

## History Repeats Itself In Paradise

There is a place in life for faith but that place is not in the mind  
Security is whatever you get when you've outrun your memories,  
    & redemption only comes when you've been damned by what you can't live down—  
But the voice of conscience is as hard to hear as it is to kill  
Love is whatever it takes to outlive your regrets,  
    & when the soul's as timeless as its absence the heart's as good as the last place it left

For in Cartagena I was threatened with my head by gangland pawns whose barked commands to pay in blood or money sounded rehearsed enough for the Norwegians and I to bolt to the ocean in full confidence that there was no real menace, only for their leader to ambush our hovel with a pistol three days later demanding hundreds of thousands in ransom for an associate of ours his boys had plucked off the street and held bound and gagged in a minivan which us ashen-faced rubes tried to collect from sympathetic friends but in the end had no other choice than to pony up ourselves

And in Medellín as twisted revenge for the student-anarchist crackdown our taxi driver played slalom with the riot shields at a speed fit to ignite terror in anyone

And in Bogotá the coffee farmer dressed his kneecaps and left elbow in a balm thick enough to conceal the freshly inked smiley-faces, having delayed the forearm winking frown until the morrow because he “just couldn't get four tattoos in a single day from a one-eyed mechanic”

And in Villa de Leyva I fought through grimy boulevards, thatched-roof shanties and identically dressed families of seventeen just to scratch myself raw from bedbugs and take in animated custody battles between the owner of the flophouse and her most unfortunate favorite mistake

And in Barichara we pelted mountain goats with packets of gunpowder

And in Bucaramanga the Chilean came in with shaved eyebrows and makeshift potato-sack pants, who as victim of a love-drug drink beating had taken a cane to the forehead and been rolled in coal, but was not bitter, and though comforted with hot tea and a bowl of jellybeans his robbery trauma and incomprehensible rules made it all but impossible to complete a round of billiards

And in Guatapé there were onions, thunderstorms and three-legged dogs

And in Armenia the shopkeepers gazed at me as if recognizing Christ

And in Salento drunks were driven from cafés by potbellied vigilantes, sprung through shattered windows by electric shocks to the collarbones and shouts of approval heard from every end of town

And in Buga there was about as much action as you'd expect in a town regularly lauded as a fixture on the religious tourism circuit

And in Cali priests in blackface played taps at sunrise on silver horns, from marble balustrades

And in Popayán our chaperone at the smoky local saloon was a decrepit grunting barrel of a wino whose overseer presence, hero complex, delusional ravings and silver ear hair we tolerated



not only because he funded repeated rounds of aguadiente but because he'd drawn a blade on a gruff crew of mutiny-eyed knaves who'd tried to run the 800-peso quart of rum scam on us stupid foreigners, only for his hospitality to be rewarded with a flying elbow to the mandible when the Anglophile and the native Argentine came to fisticuffs over the Falklands  
And in San Agustín my amorous embarrassments were confined to this haiku:

Colombian night  
the cockroach is in her room  
and I am not

And in Mocoa I was tired enough of cities to spend four afternoons redefining the wasted day alone in the sun, ostensibly because it was time for rest and respite from the dangers of the road I'd chosen but in hindsight to reassure myself I was still God

And from Pasto the ride to the border was the kind of nightmare that turns a man into an insomniac—and then at customs they wouldn't let me through until I'd proven to them that I was indeed an actual musician and not just bringing the dobro along as a decoy, so after rubbing their ears against the wood, playing dashboard drums on the steel and conferring at length in devious whispers the agents thrust it into my hands and bid me to serenade them, and after all that it took but half a bar of blues for them to nod their heads and wave me along without even checking my bag—

*Colombia, give me some of you!*  
*Colombia, come to me the way I came to you,*  
*Locombia, you land of thieves and phantoms...*

And in Otavalo three hundred spoon-clickers, shinebox bashers, coffin swatters, cauldron wobblers, cannon rollers, cutlass clangers, mushroom jugglers, expert marksmen, test-tube chimers, jawbone stompers, slingshot harpists, syphilitic whistlers, fire-breathing throat-singers, crippled clappers, shattered scatters and birdcage rattlers swirled around a bearded glass-eyed elder with a silver charango, as nymphs in feathered masks leapt through garbage bonfires, lit bottle rockets with cigars and hooted with laughter at anyone who dove for cover thinking they were gunshots

And in Quito the Venezuelan saltine salesman tried to get me to spring him from the dank chamber into which he'd been locked up for the night by an embittered hostess because his hissing chuckles, toothless leer and frazzled outbursts had finally started to terrify her—and though he somehow managed to pick the lock, vault two flights down to the courtyard and with garbled English and an evil laugh threaten to get a switchknife and spray the floor with her bile I never *really* thought him a menace

And in Baños the list of titles an illiterate visionary and I compiled for the hotel we'd agreed to open in Madagascar amounted to *Evolve The Beard*, *Cancer Machine*, *The Steroid Void*, *Barbed-Wire Cornflake*, *Striped Fleas*, *Vodka Catnap*, *Donkey Harm*, *The Hispanic Sandman*, *The Poetic Avocado*, *Clowny Dragon Showtime Thing*, and my own favorite, *Awkward Slumber Parties*, but it didn't end there—the pop combo was to have been Thirsty Murders, the album

*Modern Sounds In Drunkenness* and the feel-good single of the summer ‘Fuck Like A Pope,’ after which this faultless modern guru doled out strange and disturbed insights for the better part of a bottle, beginning with “if heaven is the destination then life’s the most important ride”—other gems included “genius is as genius denies,” “defining art is like defining rape,” “the only thing worse than being an idiot is being an intellectual,” “talk is as small as the people making it,” “when I hear the word ‘religion’ I reach for my revolver,” “‘the devil made me do it’ is no excuse for cautious optimism,” “the mark of the immature mind is the belief that one can *change* the world, and of the deluded mind the belief that one can *save* the world,” “the only thing worse than being an intellectual is being known as one,” “the only thing people think about is what other people think about them,” “the easiest way to maintain eternal solitude is simply never to respond when someone asks a stupid question,” “you know you’re in the wrong place when you feel like it could last forever,” “she sells seashells by the she’s a whore,” and finally “perhaps the only real wisdom is knowing when to keep your mouth shut,” and you never meet such kindred spirits as you meet in Ecuador

And in Canoa Moira the monkey-nosed, whale-obsessed forensic psychologist bore spectacular bruises from a four-and-a-half-hour lifetime on the run from her Andalusian toenail-crushing fiancé, and not only was the poor girl already on the verge of forgiving him but within days he’d tracked her down, in a matter of hours they’d been blissfully reunited, and she was all but certain it would never happen again—and I’d have told her the only time a woman is honest with herself is after she marries the wrong man but over the phone her father had already said it best: *‘You got beaten up by a salsa-dancing Spaniard who plucks his eyebrows?!?’*

And in Puerto López the village idiot’s screeches of triumph after dousing the slugs on his walls to death with handfuls of salt unnerved me even more than the bodies on display

And in Montañita I went down to the beach thinking of how I’d already graduated from a pale shadow of whatever promise I may have had in extreme youth to a future as endless as the ways to resist reality—to king beast of an easily replaced jungle—to a destiny too idealized to sing the songs of experience—to a cardinal pariah desecrating his individuality past the bastard limit and meticulously cataloguing whatever elements aid dejection’s rise to power & service the infernal machinery of self-deceit—and to a mental grave robbery of recollections dating back from outskirts Seoul to Asia Minor to the Middle Kingdom to the Mekong Delta—

Where in Saigon Frederique the Mauritian bought me milkshakes, taught me blackjack and hustled me off to his brother’s charming colonial home to see if I was interested in a \$35,000 cut of what the two of them hoped to swindle from an Indonesian millionaire’s widow who’d stiffed them on their share of the take from a recent casino scam, who instructed me in all the appropriate hand signals before the widow in question arrived with leather handbag overflowing with beedi cigarettes and bricks of U.S. hundred dollar bills to commence the game—soon enough I had all my cash and credit cards on the table, plagued by visions of crushed knuckles, sawn-off limbs and bamboo-cane beating, Frederique the Mauritian squeezing my knee to assure me the ruse was going sweetly, the woman convinced I must be an actor if I could afford to play

in a game which, according to the tab sheet, had reached a payout in excess of \$158,000, high enough for her to put an end to the fun for the time being and challenge us to round up a more impressive percentage of the funds than what we'd shown her thus far, but since my fortune was in foreign accounts I could put up neither my share nor the charity the brothers then demanded for their ailing matriarch, only enough to cab it out of there with enough dignity to spend the next four days dodging their phone calls as they tried to 'complete the business,' and though I wanted and needed that thirty-five thousand it came to naught

Where in My Tho all I can say is if you ever go to Vietnam alone and don't return with at least one story you will never tell another soul then you weren't really there

Where in Phnom Penh zombie homeless closed in on me in the dead of night as I cowered in an alley, foregoing the ambush in their Christmas spirit to see me home safely to the Belsen survivor's muddled memories and brown toothpaste—then back out to whip the elephants in balmy yuletide moonlight and suffer a proposition near the quay by a haughty madame whose headshot of the grade-school quarry on offer that evening I knew immediately would never fully leave my mind, so to try to forget about it went into the first place I saw that looked friendly to those seeking non-magical food but even there the owner had the Lewis Carrolls

Where in Siem Reap I was stripped of my wallet by a pair of twinkle-eyed post-adolescents armed with nothing but their giggles, my 'Nam experience not enough to deflect their half-price schemes in time, but at the end of the day a mandatory stepping stone to the eminent level of hard-won jungle wit and wisdom of the prematurely aged foreign denizens of the town who'd long ago come there for two weeks, were still there twenty years later and are there to this day for all I know or can tell, with graying hair and starburst eyes of ages, senile long before their time, imminent breakdowns a missed cigarette away, lashing out at the most trivial things with Inquisitional rage, tearing out hunks of their wives' hair, throwing chairs at the grinning halfbreeds whose births had anchored them, excusing themselves to my sad white self and offering to fund my descent into a similar ruin with one or more of the local virgins—and thus it was I came to spend that weekend the lone atheist in a venereal clinic

Where in Hong Kong the Siberian bashed in his knuckles playing gladiator in the plaza but refused to visit a hospital because he had no faith in Cantonese medicine, so we made him a cast from an empty packet of cigarillos while the guy smothered himself in bourbon and danced the *Russkaya* so he'd be able to behave that night

Where in Hangzhou we fled the absinthe house after its bored minders exposed the truth about our income bracket and caused the songfest to degenerate into smashed windows, airplane spins, bottle slapstick, butane shampoo and helpless shrieking in storm-torn streets to no local avail

Where in Shanghai I proposed marriage to a Malaysian go-go dancer after she on hands and knees cleaned every square inch of my apartment with a feather duster and didn't even seem to mind when I accidentally got beef jerky and a jug of wine with the money she gave me to buy her grapes and water

Where in Suzhou a kiss-dodging Syrian ninja lectured me on Darwin's Hawk Moth, Bloody Sunday, Jack & Jill, the Golden Rule, medieval weaponry, Katanga crosses, Dutch snow owls,

the Scottsboro Boys, Paul Joseph Goebbels, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, King Suleiman the Magnificent, all manner of modern idiocy, and love hunted, found, lost, scorned and never recovered over mashed potatoes and shiraz at a bistro classy enough not to know how to behave or even how to order, then carted me back to her hostel for a nightcap and demanded to be fucked as if I'd paid for her

Where in Nanjing my date was slipped a note from the dour Belgian twosome next table over in the Greek diner via our waitress that read *YOU COULD DO BETTER* in scrawly felt-tip pen and we *wondered* why she wouldn't take our sangria orders!

Where in Beijing fallen monks in narrow alleys morphed from robot tai-chi to chicken dance to ballroom tango, fed us pomegranates and flung the peels at rats the size of dinner plates

Where in Zhujiajiao we threw frogs at gongs and Good Samaritans, and on return to the metropolis I dictated this message to the original madman and eternal inspiration—

*Dear Alexander,*

*The country is a festering time bomb. Every species of outrage has been committed. Hardly a day goes by without taking in one of the legendary street brawls for which the Shanghainese are so celebrated. Several months ago I was struck by a callous brute on a motorbike who stopped to check the damage to his suspension but didn't even turn around to see if I was conscious or not. My Malaysian princess hightailed it down to Penang and now I get intermittent messages from her with the most wonderfully freakish excuses at English I have yet to behold. I still can barely count to ten in this language and the constant games of charades are grating on my nerves. My medical condition has stabilized, although the pollution here might be what finally snuffs me out. In my apartment the power is held together by wood glue and cutting board, the water is never more than lukewarm and the heating system could only be envied by Eskimos. A close friend has expressed interest in committing rape upon a certain political heavyweight. Another wants to decamp to the Plain of Jars for a long summer "snorting a bunch of blow and writing a new screenplay." I lost out on a potential journalism gig because I was too hung over to answer the phone and the guy never returned my calls.*

*It's said that the world is a circus and that being an American gets you a front-row ticket to the freak show. I disagree—the freak show, my friend, is here in the land of China, former Whore of the Orient, now Pearl of the Orient and surrogate hometown for the writer of these lines. May fortune smile on your endeavors, Alex, and keep evolving the beard...*

At least I spared him the memories of Ankara, gloomy old Ankara where there was nothing to do but count the midgets, reignite the smoking habit and curse the grubby little man paid to look after me, the flaky dwarf with the motor coordination of a snowman and the halitosis of a jackal who for six hours on moving day had barricaded every single piece of furniture into one apartment room even though there were a total of seven, then hauled me over to the grocery store, took an hour and a half to fill a cart with traditional provisions, prepared an eight-course meal and with a nauseating glower *watched me eat it* while he himself touched not a crumb, then insisted on first-hand guidance to the appropriate bus stop for work—next thing I knew I was trailing him through the children's hospice across the street as he circled the emergency ward, interrogated orderlies for directions to the exit, blundered into every clinical nook and cranny and finally kicked in a side door to get us out, and after forty minutes of this labyrinthine fiasco the stop turned out to be half a block from my doorstep—then to both cement our newfound

friendship and avoid ‘the bad people’ in the park who ‘only came out at night’ he not only refused every argument against leading me arm in arm through the frosty commons back to my new address but on arrival actually groveled to let him do it again

Or how in Istanbul I was chased by twelve squinteyed fishermen from Galata Bridge to the palace gates to the squawking heretic’s vulgar crowds, from human bird calls to spice confetti to the shores of Marmara back to my frigid little corner of the slum extension in the drab depressing capital, all because I’d had the nerve to resist their dropped-lira shoeshine scam

Or how all over Anatolia if they said today they meant tomorrow, if they said tomorrow they meant next week, if they said next week they meant next month and if they said later on this month it would never happen

Or how in Pursaklar the pogrom calls bled over into crucifixion blueprints—

Or how in Pursaklar even in the circus they tried to convert me—

Or how in Pursaklar less than an hour after flying halfway around the world I was greeted with weak excuses for whatever reason management had shoehorned me into a branch office half an hour outside the city proper instead of in the modern downtown enclave they’d promised by a smirking mid-level administrator who assured me it was not an issue because with them it “happened all the time”—

Or how in Pursaklar they gazed at me as if beset by visions of my slight figure smothered in brimstone, boiled in oil, thrown into snake pits, force-fed rats, toads and spiders, dismembered alive or broken on the wheel, because I’d skipped out on the invitation to the bi-annual company water polo tournament—

Or how in Pursaklar I was unceremoniously dismissed after just four months with an impertinent electronic transmission instead of the courtesy of a face-to-face confrontation—

Or how in Pursaklar having endured all that the savages even docked a third of my last paycheck on the grounds of nonexistent unpaid bills—

Or how in Pursaklar I spent the last days pacing in circles, talking to the windows, begging for asylum from my own worst instincts and looking every inch a man just back from the brink of exile, cursing myself for having chosen this scrapyard promised land over any number of East Asian pussy paradises—and in the final endless hours fled a snowy five a.m. to customs, tried to get my metal knuckles past the guards but knew the game was up when they scowled and started throwing air left hooks and contraband forms, so very fitting to end this debacle as the latest addition to the international terrorist list, and what is it with countries not wanting me to leave?

Or how the night I entered Seoul the Aussie with the gay dogs waited for me

Or how in Daegu’s lone kebab shop the Pakistani swung machetes at our heads and hollered religious slurs in his native tongue while we cowered in the corner behind his children

Or how across Paju’s demilitarized horizons new galaxies, angelic choirs, and a harem of mutated rabbits formally confirmed the latest intestineless lord and master of the famished northern minions

Or how the depraved bastard charisma of the King of Muuido roped me into serving as

organizational mastermind for his rash crusade to attain the rank of certified diamond inspector in Calcutta, decamp to West Africa for reasons of plunder, then glide down the Congo River for 22 days checking the haul for blemishes before cautiously selling them off at inflated profit margins in Hollywood and retiring once and for all from his ridiculous lifestyle having at last earned enough to subsidize his fundamental right to indolence

Or how the rum at the city casinos was too watery to do much more than keep us there

Or how I spent Christmas Eve vomiting bile and honey cake onto the bathroom floor

Or how after nearly a year of dragging myself up every morning physically, mentally, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and creatively devastated I'd become an empty shell of a foreign devil, treated like an inedible dog by all who mattered, within a sharp chopstick of slitting the country's collective throat and convinced that maybe dying was something you did when sleep was no longer where you felt the happiest

Or how in Gyeongju's heartless February chill I realized too late how many thousands had already drunk before me from the sacred spring on the Buddha hideout's mountain path, and all but certain I was primed to contract tuberculosis, pneumonia, or at least a scowl that concealed a heart of gold, tried to ring the germs away with the monk bell—

Or how I left that evening wracked by fever and morbid premonitions, and on return to Seoul spent half a day in emergency, discharged once they'd determined it was indeed 'very bad lung,' and lay trembling for sixty hours on an early deathbed, gasping for oxygen with the same distressing gurgles as the hanging man, and in the same kind of vain—and dragged myself up the next day at sunrise taking twenty minutes to dress because when you're that sick putting on socks is enough to make you collapse, then two city blocks unassisted the better part of an hour, fell to the floor in Cardiology murmuring 'help me,' and after preliminary tests wheeled in to see the doctor, hung my head and wept when he said pericarditis though no need to operate—then rolled out to the same emergency ward of three nights prior, in and out of reality with every other heartbeat, drifting through conscienceless states babbling 'Korea just doesn't want to let me go'—

Or how once moved to intensive care I was denied every request for morphine, for extra pillows, for water, for *anything* until they finally brought it, then waking hours later begging for more to no avail—

Or how every day the morning shift would come in at six o'clock on the dot, fuck up the injection change, miss the vein and giggle, then fetch medical students who would come in just past eight-thirty, fuck up the injection change, miss the vein and giggle, and at high noon clear the way for the cardiovascular bigwig to marvel at their handiwork and countenance their exacting care, who herself would fuck up the punchlines of the knock-knock jokes, giggle at the hack translations and insist I eat my cornflakes—

Or *Korean hospital food*—

Or how on top of all that I got a stomach infection and was taken down for a no-anaesthetic endoscopy, with one orderly to restrain each of my limbs while I thrashed and panicked and was ordered to resist the gag reflex—and as the specialist carefully removed the tube and

commented, in faultless English, '*now that wasn't so bad, was it?*' he rose to the very top of the list of many to whom it brings a great deal of warmth into my life to imagine suffering—  
And altogether I was held for seven nights and eight days in Hallym hospital intensive care—  
And once able to walk again I remember wheezing my way into an elevator and seeing myself in its mirrors for the first time since admission, and the sight of the Dachau reject who gaped back will never leave me—  
And spent the final night in a group room with a dozen other patients, whose relatives cranked game shows far beyond the witching hour while I sipped at lemonade and mentally had them drawn and quartered, shaken awake at dawn for a farewell X-ray but left to my own devices to find the proper room, then at last discharged into the care of celery sandwiches, stomach pills and a bag of sand from Malapascua Island with which the King of Muuido had returned from the Philippines as per my joke request of two weeks prior—  
And sat for a week as an outpatient until they determined the heart had 're-normalized' and that it was safe and sound for me to make the connection in Tokyo and fly out 21 hours before the tsunami—  
And now all of Korea lies in state only for me, and Bucheon begs for the safe return of its rebels—

*And Asia, I've bled enough for you!  
Now Asia, flee from me the way I fled from you,  
my heartbeat over your monsoons...*

And so two years later in Cuenca with that in mind I set my sights on Vilcabamba's valley of immortality, from cobblestones where fortune did everything but smile on me, from eight days shivering in faded hammocks, from damnable restlessness, from Andean skies, from the over-the-rainbow here-and-now, from where history repeats itself in paradise—O Ecuador give me more of you

And in Máncora Canadians fought sandstorms with domino blood bombs  
And in Huanchaco an ancient Scotsman told me that for the most brilliant man in America I got ripped off a lot  
And in Trujillo a blind man with an iron cane lashed out at total strangers with the kind of beating only those who dress their pets in clothes deserve  
And in Chavín de Huantar the neurotic princess threw ice cream sandwiches and bloody socks at ticket-box attendants  
And in Huaraz  
*I had to lose myself  
In order to use myself  
I had to blues myself  
Into Peru*

*Now I have to fool myself  
In order to soothe myself  
Before I blues myself  
Again to Peru*

*And you will deceive yourself  
In order to free yourself  
Before you leave yourself  
Here in Peru*

*And you will deceive yourself  
In order to please yourself  
And you'll never see yourself  
With me in Peru*

*And my empty promises  
Had once been autonomous  
But now they are dominant  
And now they are true*

*And my empty promises  
Had once been eponymous  
But now they're anonymous  
And now so are you*

And in Cusco there were soggy motorcades, hazy rainbows and Christs carved from elephant horns

And in Cusco there were so many broken, hopeless, reeking of dejection but none with a *really* valid death wish

And in Cusco after 28 hours on the road watching the scenery mutate from desert to foothill to wasteland to wilderness to flooded town to Nazca glyph to the Sacred Valley spent three afternoons laid up on my dregs-of-wardrobe sickbed casting out these first feverish lines, suicidal as the crow flies

And in Písac the entire town of two thousand turned out with motley costumes, checkered grins, wart-nosed masks, ancestral hymns, bloody tuxedos, flailing hens and donkey races down the alleys, for the festival of whatever virgin's time had come

And in Chinchero with a head full of insomnia suffered a luncheon next to doctoral candidate plankton who interested me only insofar as their capacity for slave labor

And in Machu Picchu the cameras came out quickest for the llama gangbang

And in Aguas we tied the restaurant manager to a chair and poured habanero down his throat until he suffocated, as much for the extortionate prices as for his nerve in *taxing* us for the lasagna he'd had the moral deficiency to buy from the place down the street and try to pawn off as his own signature dish—then set the kitchen on fire, and skipped about throwing hot-spring holy water and bags of guacamole in terrified village faces as collective revenge on the rube by demon proxy, excusing this behavior as symptoms of the mountain sickness bends, and you



never meet such fellow adventurers as you meet in Peru

And then the return journey led back to Cusco in reality but to Central America in what was left of my mind—

Because on arrival in Costa Rica there was nothing like bullet holes, butterfly museums and buses with San Francisco, San Jose, Santa Cruz and Los Angeles plates to make me feel like I'd really left the West Coast

Because in Nicoya the grasshoppers just couldn't organize

Because in Sámara Beach I lived for a month in a place called The Zoo, a pink closet of a bungalow surrounded by thickets of slime and infested with every cloud forest delicacy imaginable: geckos, spiders, ants, roaches, crabs and serpents indoors; roosters, hounds and swine outside—and after the shopkeepers heard I was living there I'd be refused entry to their stores and chased away as if I were a common pickpocket

Because in Liberia it took no more than cement walls, barbed-wire windows and a wooden school-desk to turn the most depressing room I've ever stayed at into a confessional

Because the Nicaraguan border crossing was stocked by guards with goat faces shorn of grins for three decades

Because in Granada on August 7<sup>th</sup> holiday a drove of bulls chased the whole city through the streets, bulls that had finally been turned loose after several riotous false starts, some roped off and dangled toward us in a feint, some unhinged as God intended, toppling water barrels and apple crates while teenagers swung from balconies to frustrate confrontation and police horses smacked delinquent dopers like myself to churchyard grounds

Because in León they held me in quarantine after I was clawed by rabid howlers one night following an experience too depraved to recount in these lines, for a graying tumor of a wound the clinicians pronounced gangrenous after one look but whose idea of a gringo fee was to schedule follow-up shots and thus oblige me to spend another week in dreary old León, where every day was a lifetime

Because in Managua I came face to face with the only man I've ever encountered of whom I was honestly frightened, a Colorado mercenary with the build of a galley slave, the eyes of a blind man's black-eyed dog and a shadowy countenance forever haunted by the memory of the Kenyan schoolboy whose slashed gullet had been counted as his first kill, who cornered me into a café table for what I assumed would be an all-night recital of the kind of gun-running, opium-smuggling and Afghani border-skirmish accounts no sane man could ever devise but after just forty minutes he got up, waved his taco bag and left, and I have never seen his likes again—and above all I'll never forget how when I pressed him for details on his earliest prison stretch he wagged his head, stroked his goatee and began “well, the parents *called* it kidnapping, but...”

And because back in Houston while pivoting wearily in line with mossy stubble and filthy corduroys I was earmarked for random search by a sweat-addled eunuch with the kind of beady eyes, robotic earnestness and tyrannically conscientious search tactics that make you absolutely

certain he's not only about to blunder upon an ounce any minute but also drag confessions to the gulags, to My Lai, to World War Three out of you with nothing more than a penetrating stare, extra terror because I hadn't checked my bag before I left, and then the subhuman had the gall to take out all my worldly possessions and leave them there on the conveyor for me to reorganize at my own curious leisure, and again, what is it with countries not wanting me to leave?

*O Central America, no more of you!*

*Centroamérica, take as much from me as I took from you!*

And so on return to Cusco as vicarious retribution on that paper Houston customs tiger I decided to get booted out of Saqsayhuaman national park by way of donkey abuse, partly to recover whatever native rebel manliness he'd taken but mainly because they had the same beady eyes And in Arequipa the twitchy Spanish colonel's niece stuffed my socks with chili peppers, doused my chest hair in lobster sauce and hauled me over to the monastery to pray for her guinea pigs not to die

And in Chivay a shaggy runt in Attila the Hun-style horned helmet tried to lure the condors in with aluminum pan pipes but even after the performance the only thing we saw was something we all concurred was just a really big bird, whatever it was

And in Puno we beat down doughnut-box barricades eager to exploit the edible-reed-eating aboriginals and their pitiless sea-bandit sidekicks for all they were worth, but to our dismay found only floating-island fires and Portuguese rosary fiends grinding out the Gentle Shepherd Prayer, babbling strange theories about a mustache and generally giving new credence to the idea that the most hideous sound on the planet is the collective laughter of those who think alike And in Taquile piebald-belted elders in calfskin shawls trembled patiently for their turn in the dance of death, while over Bolivia the sun went down as if damned

And after 21 hours on the road to Lima with the sort of nightmares from which one is more unwilling than unable to wake had no energy to see the president but enough to sit up most of liberty day morning waiting to pay extra for the luxury of having my sleep disturbed by the nation's most beneficent sadists, the cleaning staff—and since in Lima you get lost easily and it isn't the kind of place where you can just go outside and have a good time doing nothing devoted three early evenings to wandering its foggy salt-flat of a shoreline, for as all this began with the sea here it ought to end—and spent the final midnight in a taxi pretending to bond with a veterinary technician from Amsterdam over her teddy bear mania, only to be informed at the airport that it would be 113 *dollars* to put my bag on the plane, flawed departure time no matter as the thing was delayed by an hour anyway, grounded in Florida all morning on the runway with a tubercular cough, only to at long last fly four hundred miles out of our way to avoid a hailstorm, and for the last time, what is it with countries not wanting me to leave?

*Peru, give me what's left of you!*

*Peru, dear Peru, come to me the way I came to you*

*Sudamérica, I bid you adieu...*

& so after landing too late to meet my contact got the two-dollar express through Harlem but since the end of the line was nowhere hailed a cab to take me down to 52<sup>nd</sup>, knocked on a familiar door and was greeted warmly by old friends, handed out my Inca rocks and held their attention for as long as it took to start repeating all these stories and now here I am in America—

I am in America, where in Manhattan the only thing wrong with instability is that there's not enough of it

I am in America where in San Francisco everybody's too guilty of being human to be guilty of anything

I am in America, where in New Orleans you can be unknown, unheard and unread but never unloved—

Where in West Virginia you'll never be called worse, by better people

Where in Louisiana you're never far from Chinese restaurants or Bible gunpoint

Where in Washington the only ones not in it for the money are the racial realists

Where in California God's as timeless as his absence

Where in Greenville the mental wards are at a total loss to explain my early release

Where in Charlotte they're too busy proofreading suicide notes to pretend to sleepwalk

Where in the town of my birth the only thing worse than growing up to accept yourself is growing up to accept the way things are—

And here ends America, where my memories mean whatever it takes to erase them

And here ends America, now almost a human being but still no favorite of the gods

And here ends America, where I'll "roam and ramble, and follow my footsteps, to the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts"—

America, where the voice of conscience is harder to hear than it is to kill

America, where I've yet to outlive my regrets

America, where the heart's as good as the last place it left behind—O America!

O America, give me *all* of you

O America, O America

come to me

the way I came

to

yo

