



## IN THE PARK OF THE PLAYERS

Sunday, December 18, 2016 – Amritsar (India) Narain Nagar

31.63178,74.870419

The young man lies there inert. Half an arm's length away from his bare feet, his sneakers lie in the grass with his socks neatly tucked into them. His legs are slightly bent, yet everything about him appears straight – as if his body is the pointer of a big clock. The pointer does not move, though. It does not roll, does not stretch, does not scratch; for hours there is no twitching, no ticking. Nonetheless, the dial changes. That's because about 100 gentlemen are sitting in small groups around the young man on the ground, playing cards with concentration.

Sweep is the name of the game. Every now and then one of them gets up to switch to another group of players, or to take a break or go to the loo. There are trees growing out of the toilet block, so the gents pee casually against its outer

wall. You can be only as disciplined as the conditions allow.

Sunday in Amritsar. The little park a bit south of the station has no name. The leaves of the shrubs are covered with a dense, pale brown coat of dust. Garbage scars the floor: empty soft drink bottles, packets of cigarettes, packages of pills, and playing cards are strewn around – as though somebody has flung cards out of their pack in anger. At my feet, too, lies a King in the grass. I'm seated on one of the four benches anchored here, and I feel as if I'm holding court. Because some man or the other keeps coming by to sit down by my side and question what the stranger wants here.

Sayu, the painter, comes here every Sunday, even in summer: «Then we play under the trees.» Now in winter we allow the sun to warm our bo-



dies, he says, and rubs his hands together. He asks me the same question that the others do. And, as always, I have the same response to give: Naturally I have visited the Golden Temple that looms majestically over the waters of nectar. Naturally, I have seen how thousands are fed there for free, served by volunteers. I have also peered into the utensil containing 2000 litres of dal, curried linsen broth. I am a tourist – I know what I have to do. Sayu seems to not notice the sleeping youth. When I bring him to his attention, Sayu shrugs his shoulders, indifferent.

In the centre of the park stands a magnificent fountain adorned with small tiles in various shades of blue – a playful sculpture, similar to those erected in many countries around the globe in the sixties. Vikham, who earns his livelihood in a rice mill, says he has never seen water in the well – and he has been coming here for many years, twenty, perhaps more. With a matchstick he lights a small, brown stump: «This is a beedi; everyone smokes that here.» He, too, cannot tell me anything about the young man. Should I be worried?

Numerous bicycles, Vespas and cycle-rickshaws are parked alongside the park's fence. Some

cycle-rickshaw drivers are stretched out in siesta on their three-wheeled vehicle: their upper body on the folded roof that protects passengers from the sun and rain, their buttocks on the seat, feet on the handlebars.

Amidst them stands Vish's bicycle. On its luggage carrier is fixed a slightly rusty box, from the centre of which protrudes a large aluminum kettle. When a player calls out an order every now and again Vish opens his pot, sinks a dry flat bread in the chickpea soup, brings out the bread again, garnishes it with onion, mint, green chilli, and a strange sauce – and takes it to the hungry on the playground. There's a stainless-steel cup with water for free. The chana kulcha made by Vish tastes of cumin, coriander, ginger and garlic, a bit sour, a little sweet, slightly spicy – as filling and as much of a comfort food as a little Sunday roast. Most people in the Punjab are vegetarian.

At the edge of the maidan, a pig family grunts through the grass. The mother looks like a wild sow, with dark fur and bristles. One of her piglets is dark, but two are pink. You can almost see the dance of the genes in this constellation. I saw such creatures, probably urban feral domestic pigs, trotting through Amritsar here and





there, especially along the railway tracks, where only the untouchables and their children are otherwise to be seen. According to the optician Pikschem, who wants to buy my iPad, these pigs belong to nobody. Could I just shoot one if I wished to? «Sure, no problem!» he says laughingly, baring his golden molars. Evidently, as an optician you do not need to depend on the dentists offering their services behind the station on the open road.

Only now does it occur to me that something is missing here that is otherwise always part of India when people congregate: Noise. Nowhere here is a radio blaring, nobody here is testing his speakers. All you hear is the barking of dogs, the cawing of crows, the distant honk and clonk of traffic, and the occasional horn of Indian Railways' long, blue trains trundling through the city at walking pace – often ten hours late, or more. The Indian signal sounds different from the shrill warning whistle of European locomotives: it's darker, longer, grander, more like the horn of a big ship. Every train seems to have a slightly different tone, that sometimes holds a note of something

forlorn, or nostalgic, or even grim. I also hear the horns of the trains at night, because I sleep in a hotel just north of the station. Sometimes they honk over and over again, almost desperately. I can see then in my imagination how the little wild boar run around somehow disoriented by the headlights.

Gradually, the shadows lengthen. It's getting palpably cooler, and Amritsar is preparing for the next cold winter night, with temperatures below zero. The first men finish their game, put their shoes on, exit chattering. Only when the shadows cast by the trees reach his body does the young man finally stir, turning his face to the last rays of the warming sun. Does he want to continue lying there? Shouldn't he be roused lest he freeze? I seem to be the only one that notices him. Am I the only one that can see him? Or do I, do all of us here, exist only in his dreams? Then it's certainly better that we let him sleep a little more.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.

The German version of this text has first been published on Friday, January 20, 2017 in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, p. 66.