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# The Last Page

## Delhi to Chandigarh (A Poem)

On the train to Chandigarh, 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  
Chandigarh station.*"

Gregory Shaffer