

Bamiyan

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Afghanistan's ruling Taliban said Saturday it has blown up most of the massive, ancient Buddhas at Bamiyan, despite worldwide pleas to spare them.... Taliban Information Minister Quadratullah Jamal ["Power-of-Allah, Handsome"] said Saturday that the fundamentalist movement's troops used rockets and mortars to destroy the head and legs of the sandstone statues, which are carved into the side of a cliff in central Afghanistan. "Our soldiers are working hard to demolish their remaining parts. They will come down soon," said Information Minister Quadratullah Jamal.... "They were easy to break apart and did not take much time."

—CNN, March 3, 2001

Light of Asia

We still have him, in the plains, on an early lintel,
as an absence at the center of each story:
a flower, footprints, a wheel between kneeling deer.

But his words grew difficult to see.
It was hard to hear his hands. And so they began

to define and carve the balanced postures
and proportions of his princely torso:

the head with its raised crown, the long-lobed ears,
soft half-lidded eyes, half-smile, the dexterous
gestures of compassion,

blessing, protection, absence.

Al Hafiz (The All-Preserver)

March 2001

Long ago
their legs were bludgeoned,
arms broken to stumps, hands
shattered and mortared into walls,
their faces hacked off by some avid brief commander
named “Sword of Faith” or “Servant of the Avenger”
who lacked not zeal but ordnance.

But now it’s done.
The idols are broken and cast down.
In the name of Allah, the Merciful, The Compassionate,
the All-Preserver, His servants
have put out of his misery
each amputee in his niche.
Each torso blasted to dustlight.
The faithful may pass undistracted.
And suddenly the vanished trunks and limbs
fill every screen, and the world
turns its great light on the valley.

Their image falls across me like a blade, and there lies
everything your hands said.

Al Muhaymin (The Guardian)

December 1972

Before sleep, wrapped against the cold,
reliving the way in:

that turn,
below the Shebar Pass, where the road
grew thin, uneven, where the wild dog
staggered at us, blind,
rabid, ravenous.
How Qadir, the driver's friend,
opened the door and shot him.

**From the Niche of the Great Buddha,
Overlooking the Valley**

January 1972

Fields bare of wheat and barley,
of melon, apricot, almonds.
Snow, glint of river, lines
of poplar, the sound of one boy's hand
tapping a wheel-rim.

A Dream about the Dream in the Caravanseraï

The road leveled out.

Rock walls fell away into darkness. The truck
dropped us in a flat place at a mud fortress.

Dust glowed red in the taillights
and became only scent.

Inside,
camels, other travelers by a dying fire, the floor
cold and open to the air.
The girl's green eyes on us like a razor, and the man,
camped under his Land Rover,
watching you unbraid my hair.

*The shrine is like the one in Nishapur:
low dome of heavy gold, tiled minarets,
blind men on the steps whining for alms,
walled courtyards and an opaque pool, and inside
a stifling mosaic mirror maze.
Through the alabaster screen a glimpse
of reliquary, banded with jade and ivory,
that holds the martyr's hands.
Through the silk grille of my chador I see you
only as a wing or blur.
You hold to my ear a silver shell,
high caliber, etched
with all your names.*

The Expression on the Cliff's Face

First incandescence,
then a wish, and distance.

A light that time cannot displace:
his hands, then a blush and incense.

When you have lost what God cannot replace
lay waste, in your wake only ash and vengeance.

A niche. That light. His kiss.
Everything since has been cash and nonsense.

To see, dissolve his face.
Bring despair to the task, and ordnance.

Tora Bora (Black Dust)

December 2001

From where I sit now it is hard to see.
There are the years like a veil,
like snow across a television screen.

Like this journalist on my television screen
speaking, in snow, from a valley, you still
block my view of our valley, a torso
between the light and me, a colossus.

In fact there is no longer that view of our valley.
Only a blank niche, and elsewhere,
in another province and a different valley,
a camera trained on armed men
moving uphill, in snow.

