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WORKS ON PAPER

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A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

The Dream of India

[c. 1492]

For India was named by Noah, and its king is called the King of Knowledge.

For Paradise is in India, and in Paradise is the living fountain from which the four great rivers flow.

In India a year has two summers and two winters.

In India the land is always green.

Shadows there fall south in summer and north in winter.

In India there are twelve thousand seven hundred islands, some made entirely of gold, and some of silver. There is an island where pearls are so plentiful the people wear no clothes, but cover themselves in pearls.

In India wine is made from the milk of palmtrees. There is a tree whose fruit is a kind of bread.

In India there is a worm which cannot live without fire.

Snakes crawl about in the streets there.

In India they sleep on mattresses of silk on beds of gold. They eat at tables with silver vessels, and everyone, no matter of what rank, wears pearls and rings with precious stones.

There is a race of people there with eight toes on each foot and

eight fingers on each hand. Their hair is white until they are thirty, and then it begins to turn black.

They have no poor people there, and all strangers are welcome.

In India crabs turn to stone the minute they are exposed to air.

There is a race of people there who live on the smell of an apple. And when they travel they must take an apple with them, for without the smell of it they will die.

It was so hot the people never left their houses.

Horses there are few and wretched, for they are fed with boiled meat and boiled rice.

In India they have a class of philosophers devoted to astronomy and the prediction of future events. And I saw one among them who was three hundred years old, a longevity so miraculous that wherever he went he was followed by children.

There are no liars there.

In India it is the custom for foreign traders to stay at inns. There the food is cooked for the guest by the landlady, who also makes the bed and sleeps with the stranger.

There is a race of people whose ears hang down to their knees.

In India there is a fountain guarded by deadly snakes. It is the only water in that place, and if anyone wishes to drink, he must take off all his clothes, for the snakes fear nudity more than fire.

There is a race of people there whose upper lip is so large they cover their faces with it when they sleep in the sun.

And I saw a king walking with two men before him sounding trumpets; two men behind him holding colored parasols over his head to shade him from the sun; and on each side of him a

panegyrist, each rivaling the other in his invention of praises to the king.

In India there is a fruit, round as a calabash, which has three fruits inside, each with a different taste.

In India they worship the sun in a large temple outside of town. Every morning at sunrise the inhabitants rush out to this place and burn incense to a huge idol which, in a manner I cannot explain, turns around and makes a great noise.

In India they tell the future from the flight of birds.

In India if a man wants to burn himself alive, it is cause for great rejoicing. His family prepares a feast, then leads him on horse or on foot to the edge of a ditch. There he throws himself into the flames to the sound of music and celebration. Three days later he comes back to make his last will known; then he is gone forever.

In India it is very crowded because they have no pestilence. The number of people there exceeds belief. I saw armies of a million men or more.

It was so hot men's balls hung down to their knees, and the men had to tie them up and apply special ointments.

In India there is a bird called a *gookook* that flies in the night crying "gookook." Fire flashes from its beak. And if it lands on a roof, someone in that house will die that night.

In India they are much addicted to wantonness, but the unnatural crimes are unknown among them.

In India the dead are mourned for by women, who stand around the body, naked to the waist, and beat their breasts, crying "Alas! Alas!"

There is a race of barking people with the heads of dogs.

In India the ships are sewn like dresses, without a nail or a piece of iron in them, for there the rocks at sea draw iron to them, and any ship made with nails will crash against the rocks.

There is a race of horned people who grunt like pigs.

In India there are wells with hot water at night and cold during the day.

They clean their teeth with toothpicks.

In India the people are black. The blacker they are, the more beautiful they are thought to be. So every week they take their babies and rub them with oil till they become as black as devils. (Except that, in India, their gods are black and their devils white.)

In India each woman has many husbands, each with a specific duty. The wife lives in one house and her husbands in another. And they divide up the day so that each husband lives in his wife's house at certain hours, during which time no other husband may enter.

On one day of the year they light innumerable lamps of oil.

In India there are trees with leaves so big five or six men can stand in the shade of them.

They wash their feet first and then their faces. They wash before sleeping with their wives.

In India they worship the cow, and if one kills a cow he is immediately put to death. Some, particularly on holidays, even take the dung of the cow and rub it on their foreheads instead of perfume.

There are no adulterers there.

And I saw a temple high on a hill, and in it there was a single

amethyst the size of a large pine cone, the color of fire, flashing from a distance as the sunbeams played about it.

In India there is a mountain called Albenigaras which is full of diamonds, but it swarms with venomous animals and serpents; no man can approach it. Next to it, however, is a higher mountain, and at certain times of the year the people climb it with oxen which they then cut to pieces. By means of machines they have invented, they throw the warm and bleeding hunks of meat below, onto the slopes of Albenigaras. Diamonds stick to the meat. Then vultures come and snatch the meat for food, flying off to places where they will be safe from the serpents. There the men go, and collect the diamonds that have fallen from the flesh.

In India the wise men can produce and quell great winds. For this reason they eat in secret.

In India the women wear wigs of black, the color they favor most. Some cover their heads with painted leaves, but none of them paint their faces.

There is a race of feathered people there who can leap into trees.

In India the men have no beards, but their hair is long and they tie it with a cord of silk and let it flow over their backs. In this way they go to war.

In India there is a fish whose skin is so hard that men make their houses out of it.

There is not a single tailor in India, for everyone goes naked.

In India it is very crowded, for the people are of a sort who are loathe to leave their own country.

In India they worship an idol, half man, half ox. And the idol speaks through its mouth and demands the blood of forty virgins. In one city I saw them carry their idol on a great chariot, and

such was the fervor of the people that many cast themselves under the wheels of the chariot, that they may be crushed to death, as their god requires.

In India there is an animal called a *rhinoceros* because he has a horn over his nostril. And when he walks his horn jogs about, but when he becomes enraged by what he is looking at, his horn erects, and it becomes so rigid he can uproot a tree with it. His skin when it is dried is four fingers thick, and some people use it instead of iron for their plows, and they plow the earth with it.

There is a race of people there who are only one foot tall, and must always be on guard lest the storks carry them away. They are adult at age four and old men at eight.

In India there are roses everywhere—growing everywhere, for sale in the market, in wreaths around the necks of men and braided in the hair of the women. It seems they could hardly live without roses.

In India women sleep with their husbands in the day, but at night they go to foreign men and sleep with them and even pay them for it, for they like white people. And when a woman conceives a child by a stranger the husband pays him. If the child is born white the stranger receives eighteen tenkas extra; if it is black he gets nothing.

There is a race of people with backward feet.

In India there are long serpents called *cockodrilles* which live on land by day and in the water at night. In the winter they do not eat, but lie there dreaming. They kill men and devour them weeping.

In India there is a river known as the Arotani, where the fish are so abundant they can be caught by hand. But if anyone holds those fish in his hand for a short time he is immediately attacked by fever. As soon as he puts the fish down his health returns to him.

They use turbans for trousers.

They beat cymbals with a stick.

They kill their parents when they are old and use the flesh for food.

In India there is a tree, some three cubits high, which bears no fruit, and which is called, in their language, the tree of modesty. For if a man approaches it, it contracts and draws up all its branches, expanding again when he departs.

In India the girls have such firm flesh that you cannot squeeze it or pinch it anywhere. For a small coin they'll let a man pinch them as much as he likes. On account of this firmness, their breasts do not hang down at all, but stand straight out in front.

Peacocks run in the forest there.

And I saw a temple cast of solid bronze with an idol of solid gold the size of a man. Its eyes were made of two rubies, so skillfully done they seemed to be watching me.

They sit cross-legged on the ground.

In India the women go naked, and when a woman marries she is set on a horse, and her husband gets on the crupper and holds a knife pointed at her throat, and they both have nothing on except a tall cap on their heads like a miter, wrought with white flowers. And all the maidens of the place go singing in a row in front of them till they reach the house, and there the bride and groom are left alone, and when they get up in the morning they go as naked as before.

In India there are some who cut off their own heads, that they may go to Heaven. They use a strange sort of scissors.

In India if a man walks out of his house and hears someone

sneeze he immediately goes back inside and does not leave—for they think it is a bad omen.

There are people with ears like winnowing fans, and at night they lie on one and cover themselves with the other.

In India the men wear female dress; they use cosmetics, wear ear-rings, arm-rings, golden seal-rings on the ring finger as well as on the toes of the feet.

They eat alone, one by one, on a tablecloth of dung. After eating they throw the plates away.

They cohabit like a snake entwined by a vine, or rather, while their wives move back and forth as if they were plowing, the husbands remain motionless.

In India there is a bird called a *semenda* whose beak has several distinct pipes with many openings. When death approaches, this bird collects a quantity of dry wood in its nest, and sitting upon it, sings so sweetly with all its pipes that it attracts and soothes all listeners to a marvelous degree. Then, igniting the wood by flapping its wings, it allows itself to be burnt to death.

I asked them about their religion and they replied, "We believe in Adam."

In India the wife throws herself on her husband's funeral pyre, and if she will not do so, the people throw her there.

It was so hot swords melted in their scabbards, and the gems in their handles turned to coal.

There are headless men with eyes in their stomachs.

There are people who walk about on all fours.

In India there is a dragon called a *basilisk*, whose breath can pulverize a rock. Its tail can kill any animal except the elephant. It

is said that when a man and a basilisk meet, if the creature sees the man first, the man dies; but if the man sees the basilisk first, then the creature will die.

In India when they dive for pearls they take their wise men with them, for the fish where the pearls are found are treacherous to man, but the wise men chant in such a way so as to stupefy the fish.

It is so cold that water turns to crystal, and on those crystals real diamonds grow. And the diamonds and the crystals mate and multiply and are nourished by the dew of heaven.

One morning a man of great stature and with a snowy white beard, naked from the waist up with only a mantle thrown about him and a knotted cord, appeared at my lodgings. He prostrated himself full length upon the sand, beating his head three times against the ground. Then he raised himself, and seeing my bare feet, wanted to kiss them, but I refused. And he told me that he came from an island across the sea, that he had been traveling for two years, and that he had come in search of me. For his attachment to his idols was so pure and devout that God had spoken to him, showed him my face, and told him to find me that he may be instructed in the true path.

There are warrior women with silver weapons, for they have no iron.

There are women with beards growing from their breasts.

And I saw, deep in the interior, Venetian ducats in circulation, and gold coins twice the size of our florins.

In India, they do not cut any hair of the body, not even the hair of the genitals, for they believe that cutting that hair increases carnal desire and incites to lust.

In India when they travel they like to have someone riding behind them.

In all emergencies they take the advice of women.

In India on one day of the year they set up poles like the masts of ships and hang from them pieces of beautiful cloth, interwoven with gold. On the top of each pole sits a man of pious aspect who prays for all. These men are assailed by the people, who pelt them with spoiled oranges, lemons, and other rank fruit, and the holy men must bear it all with equanimity.

In India when a child is born people show particular attention to the man, not to the woman. Of two children they give preference to the younger, for they maintain that the elder owes his birth to predominant lust, while the younger owes his origin to mature reflection and a calm proceeding.

There is a race of people there who have only one enormous foot, and when they want to rest in the noonday sun, they lie on their backs and raise their foot like a parasol. They are great runners.

In India they let their nails grow long, and glory in idleness.

There are little people who have no mouth, but only a small hole in their face, and they must suck their food through a straw.

In India they write the title of a book at the end.

And I saw one of their holy men, standing nude, facing the sun, cloaked with a panther skin, and I continued on my way. Sixteen years later I happened to return to the same place—and there he was, unmoved.

It was so hot fish at the bottom of the river burned like silk touched by a flame.

And I saw far off the coast of that land a thing in the sky, huge as a cloud, but black and moving faster than the clouds. I asked what that thing could be, and they said it is the great bird Rokh. But the

wind was blowing off the coast, and the Rokh went with it, and I never got a closer look.

In India the birds and animals are completely different from ours, except for one: the quail.

[1984]

All of the imagery and some of the language are derived from works written in the five hundred years prior to 1492. India, of course, is where Columbus thought he was going.