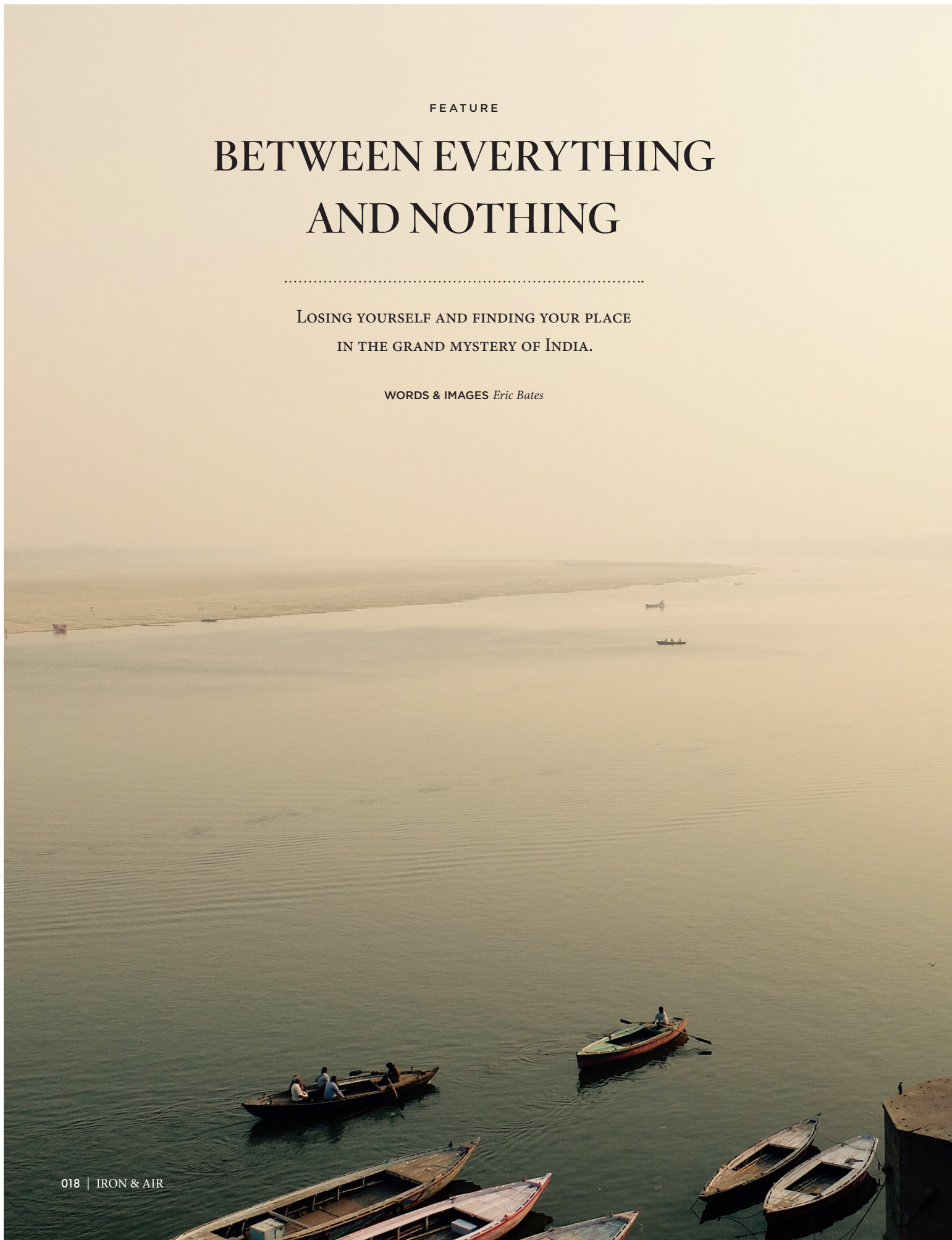


FEATURE

BETWEEN EVERYTHING AND NOTHING

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LOSING YOURSELF AND FINDING YOUR PLACE
IN THE GRAND MYSTERY OF INDIA.

WORDS & IMAGES *Eric Bates*



WE FOLLOW A MAN THROUGH A DISCOTHEQUE PULSING WITH STROBES AND BOLLYWOOD MUSIC, OUT A RUSTY BACK DOOR AND INTO A POORLY LIT ALLEY. WE'VE ALREADY SECURED AN ENFIELD AND HEARD THAT THIS GUY HAS A PULSAR HE CAN RENT US.

"DO THE BRAKES WORK?" HE ANSWERS BY GUNNING IT AND BURNING A J INTO THE DRIVEWAY. "THEY WORK," HE GRINS. HE WANTS US TO LEAVE A PASSPORT AS COLLATERAL AGAINST THE BIKE. WE HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT NEVER, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCE, SHOULD WE LEAVE OUR PASSPORTS ANYWHERE IN INDIA. WE STALL. WE DELIBERATE. WE LEAVE THE PASSPORT.

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I t's early January and I'm leaving snowy Montreal for Kolkata, India to perform with Cirque du Soleil in a \$70-million wedding with a set that will be constructed in four days with hand tools. After the wedding, my good friend and fellow circus artist Tristan and I will head into the unknown to see for ourselves what sort of country it is. Wearing two backpacks, winter-inappropriate footwear and carrying my best guess at an India-related survival kit, I head to the airport certain of one thing: adventure awaits.







“It feels arrogant to want the best of both worlds, where everything is cheap, the people are happy, and no one is looking to profit from rich foreigners. Because really, who is exploiting whom?”

As soon as you exit the sliding doors of the airport, India is tearing at the chain, barking and excited to see you. Crowds push, people point, cars honk, brakes squeal. Drivers wave at you and hold the doors open to their yellow, beat-up taxis with no seat belts, no mirrors, and occasionally, no brake lights.

At street level, India is a river of cows and dogs and rickshaws and entire families on motorcycles. It is barefoot workers with no harnesses on bamboo scaffolding 50 feet in the air. It is the smell of burning garbage and the sound of horns at all hours. Roads are in theory British-oriented but in reality opportunist-oriented: two lanes become four, right of way is determined by size of vehicle or loudness of horn, and smaller vehicles and pedestrians go where they please while traffic flows on around them.

India is the redefinition of personal space. A bus driver insists that I sit on the laps of other passengers who are already seated. A fat belly squishes into my face like a warm yoga ball. In the marketplace, street urchins claw at my pockets. Throughout the trip, Tristan and I share beds, food, sickness, wonders and aspirations, fears and frustrations. Through such intimacy, “we” comes as naturally as “I.”

India is also a land of conundrums, of everything and nothing, of transparency and mystery. Evidence of wealth and poverty is everywhere, from the half-finished buildings strung with laundry lines to the garbage bag slum built against the wall of the wedding ground. How do we fit into all of this, we ask each other, and how should we feel as witnesses to it?

The tourism trade is a war of attrition. I fend off offer after offer for tuktuks, cabs, boats, chai, marijuana, even LSD. In the face of such an onslaught, friendly greetings start to feel like crowbars aimed at my wallet and I grow frustrated with the role I've been assigned because of my white skin. But once you acquiesce to buy something — even a simple cup of chai — people are warm and generous, happy the roles have been re-established. And who am I to expect otherwise? It feels arrogant to want the best of both worlds, where everything is cheap, the people are happy, and no one is looking to profit from rich foreigners. Because really, who is exploiting whom?

We want to dive in, to join the madhouse, but how? Freedom, as the saying goes, is a full tank. In that spirit, our goal is to ride at least one Royal Enfield during our trip. This proves harder than expected, given how emblematic of the Indian motorcycle scene we believed them to be. We ask about Bullets at a mini-mart, exactly where you'd think to start a hunt for motorcycles. They call someone who calls someone else, and soon we are following this someone to the back of his hotel. The price is higher than we expected, but he assures us it is new and perfect — “the real experience,” he claims.

The bike we are shown is old, its odometer frozen at 60,000 kilometers. However, he assures us it starts on the first kick and sets out to prove it. It does not start first kick. Or the fourth kick. On the fifth kick, he manages to turn it over and grins proudly at us, sweaty and triumphant. We cock our heads at him, unimpressed, and suggest he lower his asking price. He agrees. On the whole, the transaction is the epitome of “the real experience.”

We pick up the second bike at the nightclub and walk home, feeling that in surrendering our passports we've crossed a pivotal boundary; the stakes have been raised and we are committed. Our passports and our physical health — the two things that our jobs depend on — are the two things we are putting on the line. It feels like we are gambling with

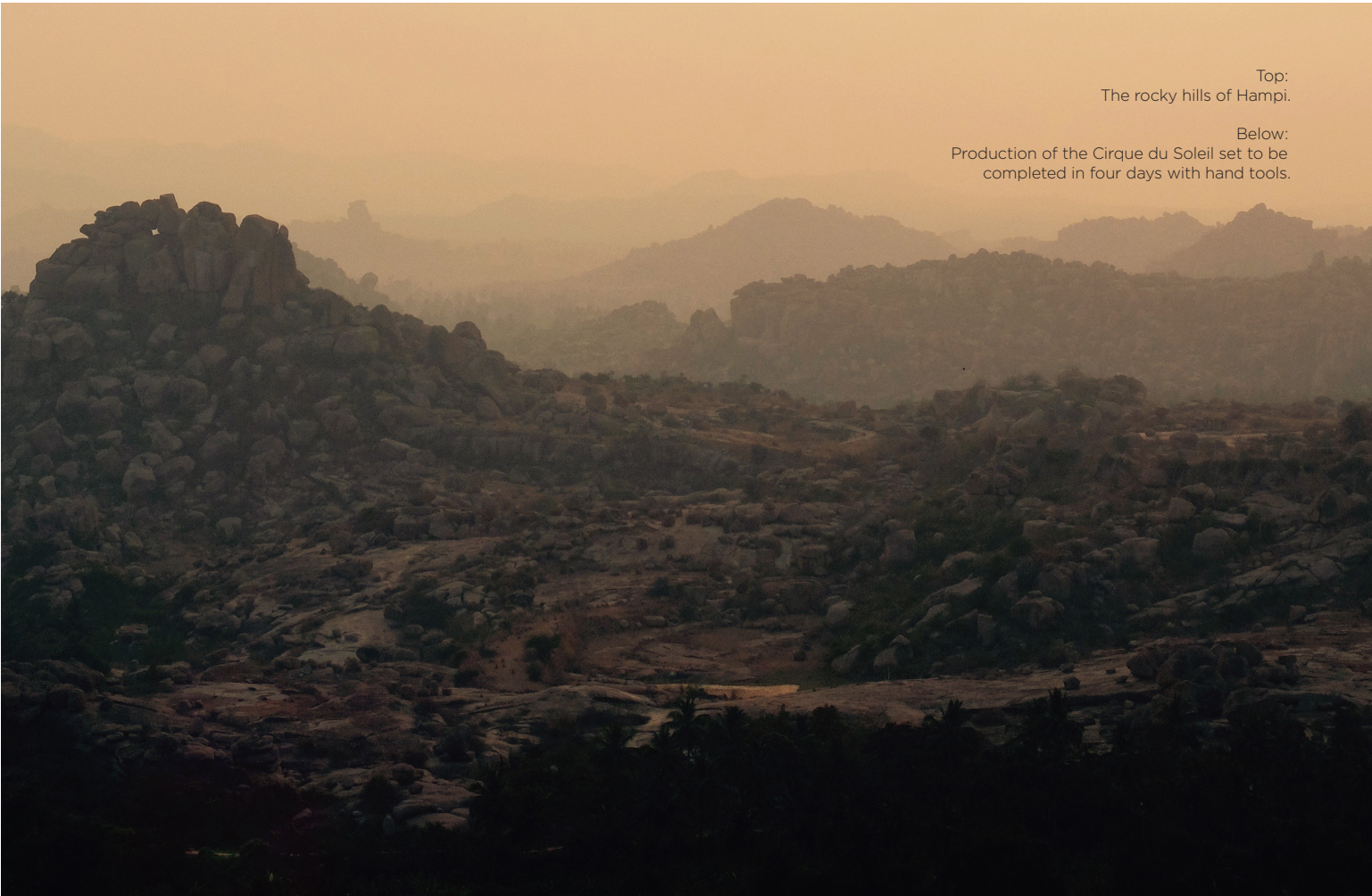
unsure odds, but to not accept the risks and follow our passion would be worse.

The next morning we wake at dawn to familiarize ourselves with the two motorcycles in the parking lot. On top of its quirky mechanical temperament, the Enfield's rear brake and shifter are reversed: right foot shifts, left foot brakes. The shift pattern is also inverted: one up, four down. While it is easier to adapt to than I expected, I still have lingering doubts about staking our passports, health and physical careers on a far-flung motorcycle adventure.

We slip into traffic and a funny thing happens. Contrary to the nerve-racking experience I anticipated, my anxiety slips away and I am overcome with the joy of riding. The traffic — so terrifying as a tuktuk passenger — is easier to cope with when we are in control. We bob and weave, carried in its current like leaves down a stream. When something comes at you, move. Whenever you move, honk. Easy.

Dust covers our faces and coats our lungs. Our eyes and ears ring with the honking, the abrupt stops and the machine gun rumble of the Enfield. The oily smell of bikes cutting into the lane ahead of us reminds us that these machines would never pass an emissions test back home.

The riding is unlike anything you'd experience from a tour bus: palm trees blasting by on either side, elephants in trucks, cows in the road, dogs darting at our wheels. The road is the raw, pulsing artery of daily life in India. We lose ourselves in warrens of small streets and dusty roads, past hand-painted boats bobbing in the river, silhouettes of mountains in the distance like scenes in a pop-up book. We pass families hanging laundry in the morning sun and kids washing themselves in their underwear, waving and yelling as we go by. In the mountains we see the mangled and burnt-out shell of a public bus, a grim sight that we take as affirmation of our choice to ride, of our choice to keep destiny in our own hands.



Top:
The rocky hills of Hampi.

Below:
Production of the Cirque du Soleil set to be
completed in four days with hand tools.





Left/Right:
The emerald tea fields and
winding roads of Munnar.

On the road we don't feel like tourists; no one tries to sell us anything. This is what motorcycling has given us, what makes it all worth it. On bikes we can experience this wonderful and baffling place with open hearts. A memorable trip depends in a large part on spontaneity, on the freedom to make our own decisions, even if they are bad ones. The element of chance allows for the best discoveries, the happy accidents and beautiful problems. Motorcycles give us the freedom to see the parts of India they don't sell on T-shirts — the parts you can't find on Google maps.

We ride until the sun sets, then aim back for our huts. When we arrive at our turnoff we look at each other, grin, and blow past it into the night, abandoning ourselves to the present. The stars above are familiar, but the rest of the world is brand new, inclusive, and we're playing by its rules. We ride through small towns, up empty, twisting mountain passes, stopping only to buy water bottles full of orange gas from men by the side of the road. "Where are you going?" they ask. "Anywhere," we answer.

India is a land that defies categorization. How to understand a country that refuses to be defined, catalogued and neatly filed into the drawers which one has previously sorted the world? Maybe it's best to stop trying to label and intellectualize everything — to join the flow and let yourself be swept away by it and remember the world can't always be broken into a series of questions and answers. ■

Eric Bates is a performance artist specializing in Russian Bar and Cigar Box juggling. He has performed in Cirque du Soleil's show, Tout Écartillé, as well as several television programs and numerous stage performances.

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