

Batala, Punjab

Apologies to writer of "Odessa, Texas"

One August, I was hitchhiking through south central Tamil Nadu
And found myself on the way to Madurai, outside a college wall
On the edge of the dried up river town. I'd been waiting
There

For half the day—Now it was dusk, the mosquito hour,
And no one was stopping—unsure, maybe of whether
I was a writer or not. The college's neon tubes

Came on, and I wondered, would I end up spending the night
Outdoors again, under a watchman's light at 3 a.m.?
A car stopped. It was a middle class car,

A light blue Buick Century, and in the driver's seat was a sweet-faced man
With glasses and white hair that had been blown in the wind.
He was grinning.
I put my backpack
In the back seat, part of which was filled with black book bags.

I got into the front, and we were off.
"Whew," he said, "I'm bushed. Just got done
with a few good hours of editing papers." I nodded
in lieu of an answer. Then: "Where're you from. . . . etc.
"I used to be a bit crazy in my younger days," he said
sort of like you. Lived all over, moved around, worked
different jobs. Some crazy places. Like Batala, Punjab
Ever heard of Batala, Punjab? Teaching English. Back then