

Ashes Along the Ganga

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I watched them as they burned. Those people. Or rather the bodies those people left behind. There, on the ash-caked platforms along the Ganges River, there are always bodies burning. The greatest honor for Hindus in death is to be cremated on those banks, to be broken down into dust, smoke, and cinders, and then swept into the river's flow to wash out to sea and to the next life. I'm not Hindu. I don't claim to know quite what I am, but I do know that India's hallowed city of Varanasi is a more real and spiritual place than any other I've ever known. Life there is hard, people suffer, people starve, people die and burn. Buildings crumble, streets are lined with filth. Shit is everywhere. Scar-faced street children with ancient eyes scramble and beg and harass to get their fingers on a few rupees so their parents won't beat them severely at night. The air is choked with clouds of exhaust, curry spice, incense, the fumes off old flaky shit from yesterday, or steaming hot freshness just left in the alley by the man who'll soon sell you your tea. Life there couldn't be more alive, and yet it is pervaded by death and ashes.

One night I wandered through a labyrinth of narrow alleyways, a map of which must resemble shattered glass, all the while steadily sloping downwards towards the river. Suddenly, chants echoed down from the alleys behind me, a group of voices, of men, their chant in unison, growing louder. And they appeared, about ten of them, black moustaches and wiry limbs, a burdened stretcher upon their shoulders. To let them pass, I had to step into the gutter and press my back against the wall. Their stretcher passed before me, garlands of white flowers strewn atop gold and scarlet sheets. Beneath these lay a faintly familiar form that shuddered slightly with each step. Someone was under there, some loved one, his or her last breath already drawn and exhaled, his or her body growing cold before being brought to the river's edge. I

followed them then, those men and their body, because I wanted to see. I'd heard of the burning, of Hindu souls released from flesh, and some thread between me and loved ones I'd lost pulled me along after their procession. When we neared the water, they disappeared into the crumbling Manikarnika temple, leaving me to stare above it into the blackness, a thick, white plume of smoke wafting up away from me to be carried downriver by the breeze.

Steep steps emerged from behind the temple onto a cascade of platforms, each level with several pyres, separate stacks of logs in various states of burning. One sat unlit. I weaved through the watching crowd, all grieving men, to the edge of the platforms, many disapproving eyes on me, many others staring blankly ahead reflecting fire. Two men carried the stretcher down muddy steps and set it awkwardly in shallow water. They threw palmfuls of the Ganga on the sheets and muttered prayers. After carrying it back up to the open pyre, they removed the sheets and there it was, wrapped toe to head in soft, white linen, starkly human. The men, one supporting the shoulders, the other the legs, set it across the logs and stepped away. They said prayers and thrust a torch into the bottom. The kindling took, smoke wisping up around the body, fire gradually taking hold to spread out underneath it like a bed.

Before long the fire raged, blazing and crackling, the flames flickering high. The linen blackened, curled and disintegrated. The fire absorbed the form, wrapping legs and arms in flame, surrounding the head completely. Flesh blistered, peeled, flaked off and fluttered away. Organs boiled, liquefied and ran. As if an illusion, the bones emerged, those of the feet protruding from the pyre, the knobby metatarsals hanging, draped in orange. Eventually, the logs broke and what was left of the body collapsed in on itself, smoke and glowing embers scattering high into the air.

Those fires warmed my skin. Those ashes blew across my face and into my hair. That smoke filled my nostrils smelling strangely of only scented wood. So lucid and real and unfathomably beyond me. Eerily enchanted, I watched them burn. Those people. I stood there drawing even breaths, my pulse in steady rhythm, and watched their bodies turn to ash, their plumes of smoke forming together as a single column and arcing up away from me into the night.