

Manikarnika Burning Ghat, Varanasi

George Such

All I can do is watch the bodies burn in the rain.

Chanting approaches: *Om Shri Ram Jai Ram
Jai Jai Ram*. Another body comes down
the street, a thick bamboo stretcher above
the shoulders of four men. Monsoon season,
what keeps me standing here in the rain?

They carry their mother wrapped in red and gold
satin down to the bank and lay her in the Ganges,
resting her head on the steps. Each cups his hands
in the river and pours the water into her mouth
five times. There, with other bodies, she rests.

Just beyond her, four boats hover, each piled
high with wood that looks like body parts.

Chanting approaches, another body coming.
All I can do is watch the bodies burn in the rain.
Below me, the eldest son, head shaved
and wearing only a lungi, positions his father
savasana on a heap of wood, the corpse limp,
head mobile. Straw in his hands, he walks
around his father's body five times, each time
touching the straw to his father's head.
He puts the straw under his father and pours
liquid butter and sandalwood powder over
him. Family members pile wood on top
of the body before the son lights the fire.

A dozen bodies burn below me, the flames,
a jealous god. I'm soaked with sweat

and rain, but I don't care. I watch the dead
change form, see them darken like storm
clouds. I watch them slowly disappear,
flesh and bones whiffing away, ashes
coming down again in the rain. The dead
move when they burn. Below me a knee
bends backwards, the shin and foot
(red, swollen, and blistered) raise upward
like a flag, then collapse into the flames.

Cows and dogs wander between the pyres,
a goat eats some fallen straw,
the undertaker, with his long bamboo stick,
pokes at each fire to keep them strong.

Another body gone. The siblings dip
cupped hands into a ceramic bowl of river
water and throw it on the ashes, each casting
five times onto the remains, fluid that turns
the gray ash black with a short hiss,
as if the water said:

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