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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