

VARANASI CYCLE.

I. Dawn.

Wind-swept at dawn the river thrashes
like a stranded fish, its desperate scales alight
in water-colour highlights seemingly cut
with a razor, revealing rag-paper white
beneath the saffron wash of the low sun.
Briefly the sky displays the clear strata
of a slope seamed with buried history,
before melting in molten gold above
a line of trees as intricate as Sanskrit.

Once, the founders of this city occupied
their side of the relentless river, raising
dwellings on the gnawed banks. Now, facing
the far shore labouring, or washing at dawn
seeing each fresh corpse pass, do these still believe
the water pure that centuries have sullied
with their hair, fingernails, faeces and the indifferent dead?

The river still unrolls from the royal lap
of the Himalaya like a silk sari
patiently embroidered with noon gold and fringed
with the darker threads of human destiny,
though the mist is now like the pale
muslin of breath obscuring a mirror
and the old boat-men offering cheap crossing
are as worn as their boats.

Still the people come, the rainbow blood
of the streets flows down the steps and mingles
with the Ganga.

From what height must their blood flow
to find momentum for this journey daily
meaning to cleanse itself in filth?
How to express this tireless truth
that over garish trash, the brittle remains
of a face amidst last nights ashes,
a boy can run so lightly and with such urgency
tug the invisible thread keeping his kite aloft
with the others, while pigeons effortlessly
weave through the tangle of strings?

The sun casts of its semblance of a red blood cell,
the glint of a snakes eye, and rises high
above the burning ghats, and the opposite shores
vista of white sand smoothly merging
into the clean skies... rise... a white heat
that above nature gives life and soothes,
and for a moment this morning,
transfigures these dwellings in mourning—
filling their forms with first light.

II. *Noon.*

The banyan logs have arrived by boat
and are stacked into match-stick towers
behind the pit, fenced like a cattle-pen,
where the first bodies languidly ignite,
burning in wreaths of blackening flowers,
watched by sorrowful or indifferent men.

A leather puppet weighs the wood's worth
on great scales, and drudges in rags
consign it to its patch of ashen dirt;
as another body descends the soiled path
while the chain of its family noisily drags—
reciting a mantra as if learning by rote.

At the muddy bank, on a bamboo stretcher,
the body is dipped in the holy stream
and its mouth forced open to receive a last
human gift, palm-fulls of water,
then it is given to the pyre, its name,
its gold teeth, the thin veils of its past.

Black oxen lie sweating in the sun
and the casually observant crowd
drink tea and breath the haunted air.
Watching, I cannot help but imagine
a familiar face behind the shroud,
fading as smoke into the atmosphere.

I try to sense if the wind is sweeter
with its passing, but the crowded air erases
such frail scents with a desperate smell.
At such moments, life is itself a pyre
on which we are stretched, our faces
shrouded in finery, that burns, reveals a skull.

III. *Dusk.*

As I sketch, children are drawn
to sit and stare, pointing with confidence
at the two moored boats, then a third
that passes as I trace
its long form. I too have known
their simple joy in semblance;
but today, being too long inured
to the flow of things passing,
I can hardly bear to describe the light
on the Ganga sleepily shifting
in torn leaves of thin-beaten gold,
nor hope to honour the ancient
loneliness of an almond boat
rowed against the fading tide.

IV. *Night.*

Every night, as if raging against the gods
the temple drums drive the red-faced monkeys
crazy, screeching over the rusted rooftops.
The alleys are left to themselves. The stars
are holes in a cardboard box where a mouse
scuttles. Lives pass as predictably as theatre.

The lean dogs lick their sores.
The betel-chewing vendor mumbles
with his mouth full, offering my change,
before spitting blood. Whispering shadows brush
you like dealers selling alien smells
distilled in the darkness of hovel doors.

At the corners of alleys, as narrow
as the eyes of cats, the policemen sit
under khaki canvas tarpaulins.
Some laughing as they scrape the shit
from their soles, waiting for tomorrow.
Some dozing, leaning on their guns.

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