

LYING DOWN

Aveek Sen

I know when one is dead, and when one lives... Shakespeare, King Lear

Last week, I had to make a short film of the view from my favorite window at home. I chose one in my bedroom on the ground floor. It looks out on the twisted trunk of a frangipani tree on which the cats sharpen their claws. Behind the tree, there are potted plants on the low roof of a pump-house, which, too, is often used by strays that want to die quietly in the dark. I chose this window, not so much for the tree, as for the creepers, cobwebs and tendrils weaving themselves into the mesh of the window.

I kept a stationary camera focused on the window-frame to capture the minute operations of chance just outside. A fallen leaf caught in a spider's thread spirals clockwise and anticlockwise alternately, with tiny shifts in the direction of wind. Insects fly about, their wings catching the light, and the grip of last year's tendrils hardens around the wires of the mesh. From a distance, nothing seems to be happening. Yet, with patience, layers of activity — ghosts of movement — begin to present themselves to the eye.

After shooting the film, I found myself watching it repeatedly on the computer, and a curious thing happened every time. As I got absorbed in the micro-events inside the frame, the film seemed to get longer and slower, and my ability to tell stillness from motion became difficult to hold on to. I even failed to notice when the film came to an end. It took me a while to realize, with a little shock, that I had been trying to discern movement in a frame that had become still. There was something uncanny about this — about projecting an illusion of motion on something that had stopped moving. It also struck me that this eerie confusion between stillness and movement was not only connected, consciously, with my thoughts on the relationship between still and moving images, but also took me back, less consciously, to my memories of watching — with varying degrees of closeness and compulsion — the faces of the sleeping, the dying and the dead.

*

Moonlight does to a sleeping face the opposite of what candlelight does to a dead one. Each assists in an act of looking that has all the perversity of love in it, making a moving face still or a still face move.

*

The other day, after the last of my great-aunts died at nearly a hundred, I had, for the umpteenth time since childhood, the singular experience of accompanying a dead body in its journey to the crematorium. It was a glass-and-wrought-iron hearse, and I was sitting next to the driver — an old man with a long beard, hooded eyes, and a spine so crooked that the tip of his nose almost touched the steering wheel as he drove. Great-aunt lay in the glass casket behind us, making up the greater part of the vehicle's length.

When we were children, my sister and I — skilled undertakers, and members of the in-house palliative care unit — would wonder whether we might be able to persuade the hearse company to take each of us on a ride through the city as we lay in the casket pretending to be dead. It would be a unique way of experiencing the city, and of being looked at. That was the beginning of my fascination with how strangers look at the supine dead passing through their

lives. I figured out early that to be in death's entourage is to become part of the otherness of death in the eyes of outsiders. As a child, this public identification with death would fill me with shame. I did not mind having to handle a body in private — tying and untying the jaws until they set properly, bathing the body, or putting it on a slab of ice — provided I was allowed to remain emotionally distant. I have always found the bodily demands of the dead easier to meet than the sentimental demands of the bereft. But accompanying a body in a hearse, with strangers looking at me as if I were dead too, made me want to disappear as a child.

How different it is now! From the moment the hearse arrived and the old driver pulled the stretcher out with a practiced movement of his withered arms, an irrepressible curiosity took hold of me. I started taking sly photos with my phone camera of everything I found myself noticing. The secret thrill of doing this was more child-like than the clinical detachment with which I used to deal with the business of death when I really was a child. I noticed, for instance, with a lift of the heart, that the driver — already a 'character' inside my head — looked like Charon, the ancient ferryman in Joachim Patinir's great painting in the Prado of a soul's journey to the underworld. I saw in his eyes the stillness of those blue waters of the Styx, and the freer blue of the sky.

Metaphysics takes a back seat once the hearse arrives, followed by the clang of metal stretcher on ancestral floor. In the midst of finer valedictions, thoughts turn to how the body might be taken down the stairs. I once found an older cousin sitting on our first-floor veranda and looking forlornly at the hand-rickshaw-pullers lounging in idleness on the pavement below, their breed threatened with extinction by the ban on hand-pulled rickshaws. "O dear," she said to me, "who will carry our bodies down the stairs once these men go, given that most of the young ones in the family have already slipped their discs from carrying the dead?"

The great-aunt who was dead had lived on the second floor, but she was petite. So, before long, we found ourselves in the hearse, and I settled in my seat next to the driver. It was the middle of a working day. Everyone on the streets was hot and bothered, full of brisk self-pity. Yet, as the glass casket drove past them, none could resist looking inside. Watching from my window, it felt like going down an avenue of gazes. I saw the arrest of death on face after face, each transfixed for a moment at the sight of something wholly Other, yet close to the bone.

There is a gesture of obeisance that people make with their hands on seeing a dead body pass by. It is quick, like a reflex. But seen repeatedly from a moving car, it takes on an out-of-time quality. It is accompanied by an expression that is more difficult to describe: the inward, opaque look on our faces when the shadow of the *unheimlich* passes over us like a cloud. We know what it feels like, but we rarely manage to see it on ourselves — only fleetingly in the mirror perhaps, as Freud once did in a train compartment, mistaking his own reflection in the glass for that of a repulsive intruder. Out on the street in the glare of the sun, I saw how this encounter with the uncanny could be both startling and banal. It returns us not only to the fact of our aloneness in the world, but also to what we have in common with every mortal creature in it.

We were heading for a part of town where death has been living in sin with sex, religion and crime for centuries, in a state of transfigured filthiness. The crematorium lies between an old brothel and an old temple. There is a flyover next to it, and a line of bored prostitutes lean against the railing of this flyover all day, playing games on their mobile phones, their backs turned to the crematorium below. Young men with neatly combed hair eye them timidly from a distance. Little shops selling quick food and the paraphernalia of cremation line the alleys outside. The river announces itself with a stench that mingles with the smell of burning flesh. I remember being told off once as a child for declaring that the smell made my mouth water.

There wasn't too long a queue near the furnaces, where death does its final leveling. The bodies are laid out next to one another on the floor, on narrow frames of bamboo. And it is here that a strange haggling takes place between the families of the dead and the men whose lot it is to do the burning. This is the tussle over mattresses, sheets and pillows. The men are quick to spot any unsoiled bedding and determined to wrest these articles from the dead. "You must shed everything here and lie directly on the earth," one of them told me, as I tried to stop him from pulling out my great-aunt's pillow. "The lighter we make her, the quicker she burns," he added. I saw his point. But I also saw his bloodshot eyes.

The heat from the furnaces was making me drowsy. I let the man have his pillow and went out for a stroll, following the stink down to the river. There were variously sized heaps of bedding along the way, and piles of rickety little makeshift single-beds for carrying the dead. Women were rootling through them, gathering discarded wreaths and burnt-out incense sticks. The river is a dirty brown god, I said to myself. Moving slowly down its thick waters were lumps of bedding, like a logjam on the Lethe. Children were trying to turn a mattress into a raft. Why does it not sink? I wondered dimly. Wherever I looked, there were slowly decomposing implements of sleep. But there was no room for lying down.