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'Epic Journeys And the Sleep of Twilight: Fazal Sheikh: *Ether*'

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Brown is not a color one ordinarily associates with fine-art photography, but it is the dominant color in Fazal Sheikh's exquisite photographs from Varanasi, the Indian city on the Ganges where Hindus go to die and be cremated.

In the black-and-white pictures in Michael Ackerman's 1999 "End Time City," Varanasi is a place of spiritual ecstasy and physical gruesomeness. For Mr. Sheikh (b. 1965), who took all of his pictures at night, it is a place of supernal calm. He roamed the city to photograph men sleeping in the street, dogs curled at rest after their day of scavenging, wrapped bodies awaiting cremation and humble memorial cairns strewn with flowers. He also shot the starry heavens where ancient men believed that ether—the fifth element after earth, air, fire and water—filled the inaccessible void.

The earth the men sleep on is brown; their faces, framed by blankets and head coverings, are brown; the water, when we see it, is brown. Mr. Sheikh's pigment prints are small, 5¼ inches by almost 8 inches, so you have to get close to them and really look: The details are crisp. The browns shade into yellows and into reds, and there are accents of orange. The men have their eyes shut and are unaware of the photographer, but we sense some nighttime cognitive process at work, some dreaming of cosmogonies that bring balance to a hard world. The weary dogs dream, too. The stillness is palpable.

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