

A Comparative Anatomy of Post-Mortem Acts

SMRITI VOHRA

1.

Once again, sleep abandons me. And tonight, even the radio is faithless. The sepulchral “*Mein aur Meri Tanhai...*” yet another time.

No. Change the station.

Richard Strauss. In the court of kings, the “Dance of the Seven Veils”. Bewitched, bewitching Salome turns in tightening circles, shawled in her eighth – a prophet’s fierce resolve, woven of desert sun, locusts, wild honey.

No. Change the station.

Four songs back to back. Bands named, respectively, Drowning Pool, Saliva, Oedema, Garbage. None bad at all.

But no, tonight television will have to answer an insomniac’s prayer.

Change channels, change channels. Then I stop. National Geographic. For a full hour, mesmerised, I gape at Gunther von Hagen’s tableaux of crafted corpses, “the democratisation of anatomy”, performance art with plastinated “biomass”. Exhibited in European, Asian, American cities; until now viewed by over 14 million people. Thousands, including grandparents and children, are signing up for the procedure. For convenience, the body donation form can be downloaded from the official website.

Never have I been wider awake. In a warehouse, Chinese employees in surgical garb sit on benches around tables with cadavers stretched out. Noses an inch away from the putrefaction, the teams excise tissue with tweezers, needles, scalpels, hooks, fine-tipped tools. Concentration is absolute. None looks up, left or right, relaxes, breaks rhythm or stops.

Another warehouse, with more Chinese employees in surgical garb. In a precise drill they lift prepared bodies, arrange them in large tanks filled with liquid. Hallucinatory high priest von Hagens supervises. In a later clip his wife confirms that he has persuaded her, after much effort on his part, to ensure that he too is plastinated after he dies.

2.

<http://www.bodyworlds.com/>

Gunther von Hagens invented plastination at the Institute of Anatomy at Heidelberg

University in 1978 and has been developing it further ever since. With the invention of plastination it has become possible to preserve decomposable specimens in a durable and lifelike manner for instructional, research and demonstration purposes. During a vacuum process, biological specimens are impregnated with a reactive polymer developed specially for this technique. The class of polymer used determines the mechanical (flexible or hard) and optical (transparent or opaque) properties of the preserved specimen. Plastinated specimens are dry and odourless; they retain their natural surface relief and are identical with their state prior to preservation, down to the minutest level; even microscopic examinations are possible.

The plastination technique replaces bodily fluids and fat with reactive polymers, such as silicone rubber, epoxy resins or polyester. In a first phase, solvent gradually replaces bodily fluids in a cold solvent bath (freeze substitution). After dehydration, the specimen is put in a solvent bath at room temperature for defatting. The dehydrated and defatted specimen is then placed into a polymer solution. The solvent is then brought to boil in a vacuum and continuously extracted from the specimen; the evaporating solvent creates a volume deficit within the specimen, drawing the polymer gradually into the tissue. After the process of forced impregnation, the specimen is cured with gas, light or heat, depending on the type of polymer used.

3.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/2493291.stm>

20 November 2002

The first public autopsy in 170 years has gone ahead before a paying crowd on Wednesday, despite police threats that they would intervene. Professor Gunther von Hagens defied warnings from Scotland Yard that his show in front of a sell-out crowd at London's Atlantis Gallery could be illegal. Among the audience were anatomy professors, asked by Scotland Yard to attend and monitor proceedings. Her Majesty's inspector of anatomy, Dr Jeremy Metters, had sent the professor a written warning which said the planned procedure would be "a criminal offence under the Anatomy Act" as neither he nor the venue had post-mortem examination licenses. Professor von Hagens told the BBC that he would rather go to jail than cancel the autopsy and that he was "on good legal grounds" to hold the autopsy in public.

The event was shown on giant screens outside the east London art gallery. More than 1000 people were on the waiting list for tickets and around 200 hopefuls were left disappointed outside the gallery in the rain.

There were gasps from the audience as he cut through the skull with a hacksaw. After opening the chest, he stuck his hand in deep and, with the help of a colleague, pulled up a huge portion of innards.

"I have liberated the lungs and the heart", he declared.

In all, eight organs are removed in a standard autopsy: the heart, the lungs, liver, spleen, kidneys and the brain. Many viewers covered their mouth and noses as the stench from the body filtered into the auditorium.

Liberal Democrat health spokesman Dr Evan Harris said, "There are good reasons to restrict the performance of autopsies to licensed people and licensed places, not least of

which is the importance of ensuring adequate consent and to protect those members of the public who do not wish to view human remains. Health ministers should be clear that action against Professor von Hagens is on the basis of unlawful autopsy, and not a matter of censorship”.

Channel 4 planned to televise the autopsy later on Wednesday. It defended the decision to broadcast the event. A spokesman said, “The broadcast, at midnight, will be preceded by a clear and specific warning; and a studio debate before and after footage of the autopsy is shown will put the event in its proper context”.

4.

Sit, Gunther. Here we are, two courteous eviscerations flexed in a livid ceremonial of ducts and sphincters, tendons and cartilage. Hand me the remote control, I have something to show you on the Discovery channel. Scientific terminology in Hindi is a discourse doubly alienated, but for a programme such as this, on gestation and birth, we need not even listen. Even you are amazed. How, where, was the camera implanted? Its relentless eye has entered terrain beyond even the fabulous, recording the milky violence of the inevitable spasm, and the single fearless egg that waits alone in a furrow, solid as a bowling ball. Around it, sperm in their millions fight and die. The last two remaining warriors increase their frenzy; as one weakens, the other with lightning force buries its head in the egg's patient membrane, triumph instantly sealed, inviolable. This unstoppable act, this end, is the beginning. No, Gunther. You say I should be everlasting because I am a wonder of nature; I say all nature is wonder, this is all I need to understand; this much knowledge is sufficient.

5.

http://www.fact-index.com/b/bo/body_worlds

Von Hagens maintains strict copyright control over pictures of his exhibits. Visitors are not allowed to take pictures, and press photographers have to sign agreements permitting only one publication in a strictly defined context, followed by return of the copyright to von Hagens. Because of this, a German press organisation has suggested that the press refrain from reporting about the exhibition altogether. In 2003, officials of Munich tried to prohibit the exhibition there, arguing that it violated human dignity and laws regulating burials. Von Hagens appealed and managed to obtain a temporary injunction allowing the exhibition but requiring that certain ‘artistic’ exhibits (including a man carrying his own skin, a man on a horse holding his brain in his hand, and a man kneeling in prayer, holding his heart in his hand) be covered.

The exhibition in Hamburg in 2003 took place in the rooms of an erotic art museum on the Reeperbahn. A local official's initial objections to the artistic exhibits were overruled by officials of the Hamburg Senate.

6.

<http://www.hindu.com/2004/12/08/stories/2004120813530300.htm>

8 December 2004

Originality is what makes MEDEX-2004, the medical exhibition on at the Gandhi Medical

College till December 16, different from other expos.

There are preserved forms of mutilated limbs, fetuses, cadavers, an open mortuary with real bodies inside – bloodcurdling it might seem, but then, the aim is education.

The originality goes to such an extent that anyone casually passing by Room No. 204 could scream “Suicide!” on seeing a woman hanging from a rope. It takes some time to realize that this too is just one of the scenes of death put up by the Forensic Department.

Formally inaugurated by the Home Minister, K. Jana Reddy, here on Tuesday, the exhibition, which will be open from 9 am to 8 pm daily, has a striking range of exhibits on display, photographs of gory crime spots and scenes of death, apart from various working models made by the students of the college.

With 32 departments vying to outclass each other through 40 rooms spread over four floors, visitors surely have something to see on hand. There are messages too, like the one against female foeticide put up by students of the Anatomy Department. The cadavers too catch one's eye easily, particularly that of a child, its head and limbs bandaged and placed casually on a chair.

The exhibition on Tuesday had scores of schoolchildren, medical students and nursing students as well, making the rounds of the departments. If some were full of queries, others were silent, a handkerchief held tightly to the nose, staring at the exhibits with a look of disbelief.

7.

No, Gunther. Unsuture me from the loom of my bones, thread my sweat into garlands, leach tormented voltage from my nerves, plunder me till I pour from the chalice of your brimming hands. But I do not want to endure the five thousand years that you promise me, in the unblinking rapture of the plastinated. And can you contain all of us: foetus, human, gorilla, colt, giraffe? How will you manage the blue whale? Its heart alone is the size of a small car, the blood vessels large enough to accommodate a fast-swimming full-grown trout, or the leap of salmon catapulting up the falls to mate and die.

8.

[http://www.guardian.co.uk/russia/article/17 October 2002](http://www.guardian.co.uk/russia/article/17%20October%202002)

Russian police have charged a senior Siberian pathologist after investigating for a year how 56 corpses ended up in Germany as part of Gunther von Hagens' project to preserve human bodies as works of art.

The police say that eight corpses were supplied under false pretences to the German institute where Professor von Hagens developed his “plastination” technique of replacing bodily fluids with synthetic resins.

Prosecutors in the southern Siberian city of Novosibirsk say that Vladimir Novosyolov, head of the regional bureau of medical expertise, told the relatives of eight dead people under his jurisdiction that their bodies had been cremated.

The relatives were given urns containing their supposed ashes, while their real bodies, it is alleged, were sent on to Professor von Hagens' Institute of Plastination in Heidelberg, in 1999.

Russian law permits “unclaimed bodies” – those for which relatives cannot be found or show no interest – to be used for scientific research, but customs officials noticed unexplained shipments of human remains from Novosibirsk to Heidelberg.

Professor von Hagens’ institute provides bodies for his exhibition *Body Worlds*, in which plastinated corpses are cut open to expose their internal organs and bone structures, and then put in lifelike poses. The professor said none of the bodies in the exhibition was from Russia.

The police in Novosibirsk have not implicated the professor or his exhibition in their inquiries. They say that Mr Novosyolov signed misleading documents, which were given to relatives. Investigators are struggling to find a reason to charge him with abuse of office.

Each family paid only the equivalent of forty pounds for the urn of ashes and the crematorium service. “If this money went into their pockets we would be able to accuse them of fraud”, said Yevgeny Gosteyev of the prosecutor’s office. “But the money went to the accounts of the regional bureau of criminal medical expertise, for development”.

The prosecutors suspect that scientific advancement and cooperation was the main motive. Mr Novosyolov could not be reached for comment.

The macabre chain of events has outraged Russia. A further 13 people, including the rector of the Novosibirsk medical academy, Anatoly Yefremov, who made the agreement with Professor von Hagens’ institute, were investigated, but no one else has been charged. The authorities say they stopped a second shipment of bodies several years ago, and that the agreement between Novosibirsk and von Hagens has been terminated.

Mr Gosteyev said, “We managed to identify all the 56 bodies. But they were supplied to Prof. Hagens as nameless merchandise, which neither he nor the families can identify. In the customs declaration they were simply called ‘biomass’. In many case we did not find relatives”.

Professor von Hagens said, “I really do not know what this fuss is about. My exhibit was ready before I had a contract with Novosibirsk. I have no reason to doubt that the bodies [at my institute] were acquired by legal means”.

He said he had hired a journalist to go to Novosibirsk and record testimony from officials to prove that there was nothing illegal about the way he acquired the bodies. He added that he thought the investigation was over: “I have as much to do with this case and the problems, and the alleged betrayals, as a penguin has to do with Christmas celebrations”.

9.

Hurry, hurry, Gunther. But be careful, this is ITO, supposedly the busiest traffic intersection in all of Asia. You don’t want to end up as a statistic on the board near the Police Headquarters, close at hand. The numbers change daily. Reported road deaths are about 60 per month on the average; as for the unreported, it doesn’t matter. We are over a billion citizens, and we are always dying – imagine the biomass, Gunther! The sheer volume and variety, in generous, copious, ever-proliferating quantities! Snatched from immolation, from immersion, from interment, our potential to serve art, to serve science! Your resin baths, your skilled realigning of our warp and weft the final destination of all our violently-embedded castes and creeds!

But we are not in Heidelberg, Gunther. We have our own laws. The 1949 Bombay Anatomy Act (adapted and modified by the Adaptation of Laws Order, 1960) provides for the supply of unclaimed bodies of deceased persons to hospitals and medical and teaching institutions for therapeutic purposes, or for the purpose of anatomical examination and dissection. The 1982 Maharashtra Kidney Transplantation Act; the 1957 Bombay Corneal Grafting Act; the 1982 Eyes Act; the 1982 Ear Drum and Ear Bones Act. We have the 1994 Transplantation of Human Organs Act that provides for the regulation of removal, storage and transplantation of human organs for therapeutic purposes, and for the prevention of commercial dealings in human organs and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. With the Act coming into force, brain death has finally acquired legal status in India. Any offence punishable under this Act shall be tried in the court of a metropolitan magistrate or a judicial magistrate of the first class. But what does the law influence, since so many of us prefer to surrender our biomass to fire, to earth, rather than to the hands of the living? Even when we are past all touching, we don't want to be touched by anything except by flames, worms, river water.

Hurry, Gunther. I can see your black hat across the road, you are still in the same place. You should follow the pregnant beggars, the urchins, the lepers stuffed into crates, the maimed, the armless and legless, the destitute biomass deftly wending between the wheels of the buses, rapping on the windows of cars, beseeching. But today they are all coming towards where I am standing, outside the office of the newspaper I work for. The stench of the dead camel at the entrance of the building is pulling all the pedestrians this way. The *chaiwalas* and *paranthawalas* have abandoned their stoves; lucky cows are feasting on the bananas piled on carts that vendors have left to come here and stare. This is not how I want to begin my Sunday duty, Gunther. Normally it is quiet, very little happening in the city, hopefully nothing to report. I like to take refuge among the pages of the international newspapers and read about the hygienic streets and orderly public life of those first-world countries I know I will never see. Yet here I am, next to the putrid biomass that apparently dropped dead exactly outside the office entrance during the night, no one knows when.

"*Mar gaya, bas* (It died, that's all)", says the *chowkidar* (watchman). "*Uthwa dijiye* (Get it disposed of)..."

This is valuable biomass, Gunther: unless you arrive quickly and stake your claim, other interested parties will be here very soon. Crows are already perched on the upper ledges of the nearby buildings, there are vultures circling overhead, flies are sipping from the beast's crusted eyelids and mouth. Stray dogs, ribs showing, are gathering in eager packs behind the crowd.

I go upstairs, call the disbelieving municipal corporation, hang up. I go outside, stand by the festering bulk, wait. Everyone is waiting, Gunther – the crows, the dogs, the vultures, the humans. The odour gags us like a thick handkerchief. About 15 minutes later, an MCD tempo with a dilapidated towing winch arrives, horn blasting. The driver and another man get out, assess their task. The crowd closes ranks, edges forward.

"*Truck kahaan hain* (Where is the truck)?" I ask.

"*Maine bola to tha aapse, itwaar hai, tempo hee mil sakta hai* (I told you, it is Sunday, you will only get tempos)..."

"Tempo mein aap oont ko kaise laad sakange (How will you load the camel into a tempo)?"

"Chinta mat kijiye, upaay hai (Don't worry, there is a plan)".

The man picks up a huge crowbar from the back of the tempo. "Oont ke taang tod denge, tab mod denge, tab usko ghusa denge tempo mein (We'll break the camel's legs, then bend them; then we'll shove it into the tempo)".

He waves the implement at the crowd. "Chal, peechey hat, peechey hat (Come on, move back, move back)..."

People retreat a few inches. Those at the back of the crowd begin to eagerly jostle towards the front. The MCD man positions himself, swings the crowbar at the camel's knees, callused into dense pads from innumerable obedient genuflections and risings to the tug of reins, bit, bridle, rope through the septum. My hands fly up to cover my ears but it is too late, the sound of iron on cracking bone ripples through me like terrible lightning. I can still hear it. The pounding continues, the mangy pelt ruptures, the condyles splinter, flesh begins to protrude. Some in the crowd turn away, some press forward; the flies continue to drink unperturbed from the beast as it lies unmoving in a mode of bloodstained deliverance, absolved from all mauling, all caressing. In our country, Gunther, every last inch of this biomass, from nose to tail, will be used and re-used.

I don't stay to witness the end of the battering, the tethering, the lifting, the winching. You should have crossed the road in time to help us, Gunther. Here in the third world we always need to learn from skilled practitioners, we need models of greater efficiency.

10.

The anatomy theatre is filling up, Gunther. From where you have placed me, on a table in the middle of the central well, I see the procession of your hallowed teachers. Herophilus; Erasistratus; Marinus; Galen; Avicenna; Vesalius; Fallopius; Fabricius; Casserius; Spigelius; Eustacius; Sylvius; Servetus; Harvey, who spent half his life searching for the path of blood from the twigs of the arterial tree, with its great trunk and branches, to those of the venous tree; Malphigi, who stood on a hillside near Bologna, held up a piece of frog's lung against the Italian sunset, and saw for the first time the delicate lace of capillaries.

Save a seat for Dr Mengele of Auschwitz, perhaps he too considered himself to be of this learned tribe.

Tier upon tier comes into view, crowded with unnamed others: those who sliced the bandaged meat of mummies, the sodden muscles of wounded gladiators, to feed an obsession; the showmen with cleavers, deaf to the cries of the live apes, pigs, dogs roped to their tables, skinned to amuse crowds on public holidays; medieval vivisectionists searching the body for the soul, entering corpses the way spades pillage graves; the ones who tied candles to their scalps and went about their blood-soaked task at night, in secret; the ones who exhumed the innocent, caressed rigor from the marrow of the condemned, cut down from the executioner's gibbet those hanged for sodomy, for theft, for murder.

Finally I glimpse him, the half-paralysed guest of honour, magnificent old da Vinci. Beard combed by spiders, cranium pocked with the embers of dying constellations, lips sealed with rust. Yet as he fumbles to his place I hear each of his phrases fall, like withered fruit

from the stem, through the centuries: "Abbreviations do harm to knowledge and to love, seeing that the love of everything is the offspring of this knowledge, the love being the more fervent in proportion as the knowledge is more certain...Of what use, then, is he who abridges the details of those matters of which he professes to give thorough information, while he leaves behind the chief part of the things of which the whole is composed? It is true that impatience, the mother of stupidity, praises brevity, as if such persons had not life long enough to serve them to acquire a complete knowledge of one single subject, such as the human body; and then they want to comprehend the mind of God in which the universe is included, weighing it minutely and mincing it into infinite parts, as if they had to dissect it...!"¹

Despondent, solitary, exquisite Leonardo. Falcon in the sky of thought, bestow your undimmed gaze upon this specimen on the anatomy table, this irreducible intersection of planes, projections, dimensions, depths, foreshortenings, theorems, axioms, intervals, convergences, symmetries, coordinates; this regressed horizon; this vanishing point of all perspective. The maestro has remembered to do what you forgot, Gunther: he calls two boys from a rowdy gang of studio apprentices, free today from grinding colours and cleaning brushes; he sends them up and down the noisy tiers to ignite clumps of incense on the ledges, preparing a shroud of jasmine, rose and musk for the slimy ghost of my disinterred fumes.

11.

<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/europe>

18 January 2004

Controversial German anatomist Gunther von Hagens used the corpses of executed Chinese prisoners to create his exhibitions of synthetically preserved human bodies, German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* reported on Saturday.

According to *Der Spiegel*, a centre operated by von Hagens' company in the Chinese coastal city of Dalian held a stock of 647 preserved bodies in November 2003, which were destined to be either exhibited or sold to universities. The report said a number of bodies were procured from two nearby prisons, including one housing political prisoners, and that a number were purchased rather than donated. *Der Spiegel* cited the case of a young woman and young man, whose bodies were delivered to von Hagens' centre in December 2001, shortly after they were both executed by a bullet to the head.

Interviewed by the magazine, von Hagens admitted that his co-workers had accepted the two bodies in question, although he said he had been shocked to discover the incident and that the workers had since left his company.

The anatomist appeared last year before a parliamentary committee in Kyrgyzstan to answer questions about the discovery of 200 decaying corpses in the basement of a centre he established in Kyrgyzstan's medical academy.

12.

Follow me into the tower of the church, Gunther, up the steps, a few more. I have been up here before, alone. Massed grey clouds, New York's winter wind blowing off the river, raking

my face; the skyline as distant as a thought subsiding. This city was different then, the World Trade Center still standing, Osama's minions not yet woken into their dream of a martyr's paradise. I took a moment to catch my breath, put my hands on the cold casings of the giant bells. Shock as the thunder coiled in their silent tongues surged through my palms. Gunther, the anatomist in you would appreciate the invisible, fantastic circuitry of electric ringing. Let me explain; I looked it up in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Wires lead from a standard piano-type keyboard to relays, located near the bells; and wires from the relays run to solenoids connected to the clappers. Pressure on the console keys transmits the current to the solenoids which pull the clappers. A good bell, properly struck, should give out two distinct notes – the strike note or key of the bell, and the hum note that should be a major sixth below the strike note. A good bell possesses a full, round tone, and if cast thick, should be able to last through the ages.

By the way, Gunther, to the ringers a bell is always feminine.

It was getting colder by the second. I struggled towards the little cabin on one side, opened the door, stepped into warmth. The old man sitting at the bell console, head jerking from left to right in a compulsive twitch, looked up without surprise. As if he knew me, as if he had been waiting. I stared at his clenched fists, heavily bandaged into stumps to control the constant tremor of nerves gone forever wild.

No greetings, no questions, no statements. Nor did I have anything to say. He lifted the stumps from his lap, set them on the console.

"What shall I play for you?"

Stunned, I went completely blank; then mumbled the name of the one composition that came to mind, since it was Christmas eve: Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring".

He grunted approval, pressed the stumps to the keys, began. Sweat crawled upon his forehead as his hands moved, extorted unwavering obedience from the degraded ions that somehow pulsed with complete precision across the gap between his spliced axons, past corroded fibrils and papillae, through the roots and stalks of stuttering ganglia. Snow began its drift downward; the great throats of the bells filled up, emptied, released notes as crystalline as the falling flakes, their lattices immutably meshed before the final liquefaction and dissolve. In that moment, Gunther, I realised the one way true art comes to be – travail and expulsion, never anything less than an arduous birth from the immaculate, impersonal sanctum of beauty. I thought of a master-practitioner, your famous countryman Kappelmeister Johann Sebastian Bach: celestial octaves storming through the canals of one ear, and deep in the other, slowly dilating and contracting around malleus-incus-stapes, the sumptuous carnal fugue of his 20 children. I thought of a master-artist: the crown of thorns, the nails hammered through bone, the yielding flesh splayed on rigid wood, the spear hauling back drapes of skin to lay bare a fearless crimson magnificat; I thought of the agony of the perfected life, the ecstasy of the perfected death, and the absolute knowledge that there is no difference between them. Gunther, perhaps the acceptance of this phantasmagoric certitude is what brings, what will bring, the peace that passes all understanding.

13.

Welcome, Gunther. You finally crossed the road, entered the office, reached me at my typewriter. Before I open the assignments book to see what I have to report on today, let me tell you about last Sunday. Among others, a quadruple homicide in East Delhi. I found the resettlement colony, a maze of lanes, choked gutters overflowing. It was raining so hard, I was soaked to the bone, could barely see. The house I needed to get to was blocked off by a large buffalo dozing, gloriously wet, stretched across the lane from end to end. I splashed up to it, stood still. The only way to get past it was to climb over it – and this is what I did, Gunther. I straddled the animal as if it was a fence, and managed to lurch over; it remained unmoving. I crossed the threshold of the house and stood dripping in a crowded room with the body of a youth on the floor, wrapped in a sheet. Women beat their breasts and wailed, and a very young wife smashed her bangles against the doorframe. Sparks of glass scattered around my feet, tiny chimes fading into silence. I looked around for the other three bodies and realised with a shock that I was completely in the wrong place – this was the wrong site, the wrong community, the wrong death. Yet I could have crossed the threshold of any home in any lane in any neighbourhood, and the fact would always be the same: death, the unremarkable guest, who one extraordinary day becomes the master of the house. Even if all that can be seen is the pulse of the living: tea boiling on the stove, babies crying for the breast, fingers picking grit from rice grains, plants in need of water, clothes in need of mending, wounds in need of balm.

I did finally locate the house of the quadruple homicide. The constables at the site remarked with jaded conviction that the attack was committed by the *banwaria*, officially classified as a “criminal tribe”. Allegedly, their women scout the back lanes of colonies in the guise of ragpickers, gathering information; the men go about their business of housebreaking and violent crime wearing only loincloths, bodies lathered with oil to make escape easier, should anyone try to take hold of them. In this case the assailants had fled across the border into Uttar Pradesh, so were out of the jurisdiction of the Delhi police. There was nothing to follow up. But I did follow up on the victims. They had been attacked while asleep, with the legs of a *charpai*. Bludgeoned on the skull with such force that blood flying upwards had stained the curtain pelmets.

I tracked the sole survivor to the same hospital I had spent hours in the previous week to report on a seminar on embalming techniques. The only thing I could recall were slides of maggot-crusting forensic exhumations, a commentary on how the pharaohs were ritually eviscerated by a hook mechanism inserted through the nostrils, and one speaker claiming to have plucked 87 sten-gun bullets out of a riddled former head of state assassinated at close range. The woman who survived the *banwaria* assault was barely breathing, several months pregnant, head swollen almost to the size of her belly. The nurse standing by the gurney told me that bodies of the victims were in the morgue, in the basement of the hospital. I had to take the lift to get there. I held its wheezing cage open for a painter with a bamboo ladder, and then for two employees struggling to hold upright a corpse wrapped in a dirty sheet. Full rigor. They muscled the bulk forward with strenuous effort.

“*Yeh kya kar rahe ho* (What the hell are you doing!)” the painter exclaimed, as the weight was thrust forward and pushed between us.

"Arrey, do minute ki baat hai. Seerhee do (Oh, it's only a matter of two minutes. Give the ladder)..."

They wedged the corpse into the angle between two walls of the lift and pressed the ladder against it, to hold it in place. Caged in the lift, sentient and insentient biomass travelled down to the basement together. I held the door open. The two men heaved the stiff flesh onto the ladder, shouldered it like an awkward palanquin and moved at a quick trot down the dank corridor to the morgue.

The painter followed, protesting. "*Meri seerhee kahaan le ja rahe ho* (Where are you taking my ladder)?"

"*Waapas kar denge, do minute ki baat hai, maaloom hai maans ka tukda kitna bhaari hota hai? Kabhi pahaar ke barabar lagta hai.* (We'll return it, it's only a matter of two minutes, do you know how heavy a piece of meat is? Sometimes it feels equivalent to a mountain)".

I followed the men to the morgue, but the bodies I sought were missing. Only three trays that stored cadavers were functioning, the other dozen were jammed shut. There was floor space for about 25 bodies, and at least as many rats, some of which were at work on ears and toes while the morgue attendant sat examining the oily triangle of a *breadpakora* as if to verify the genius of Euclid. "*Hamein kya maaloom* (What do I know)", he snapped, waving at the corpses. "*Aap inse poochiye! Shaayad inke paas kuch jaankaari ho jo aapke kaam aa sakti hai* (Ask them! Maybe they possess some information that will be useful to you)!"

All in a day's work, Gunther. But my final assignment, another infant-falls-into-open-manhole incident, on Asaf Ali Road, did bother me. I went to the site, returned to my desk, wrote nothing. There was nothing to write. The parents, illegal Bangladeshi migrant ragpickers, could not be traced. As for the crumb of starving biomass, instantly metabolised by the fecund, voracious, seething bodyworld of Mother India: what could my one inch of futile type say, about the reeking mouth that had swallowed a tiny life just barely begun?

14.

The Plastinator approaches, hovers. Hat black as a raven's wing, each retina a small mad jewel splashing pale blue fire. He sets his icy ear to my ribs. The carillon still peals within, strike note and hum note insistent, atrocious, louder than war. Unmoved and unmoving on the anatomy table, I am as alert as an eye under its lid, my bodyworld a charred seed in the moist bed of mind. His lustful acids have rendered me crisper than new silk, softer than the breast of a dove. Scimitar phalanges part me, stroke through navel of ashes, spine of rock, womb of water, thighs of plunging sand. His teeth of flesh and tongue of bone spit obscene labials and gutturals as tiger-claw forceps extract from my flayed throat the fugitive tremolo of a lost child. No, Gunther von Hagens, it was not I who said that the body is a garment; that the body is a sheath; not I who said that the body is like a dream; that when we see this and wake, not a trace remains.

NOTES

1. Windsor Anatomical MS. C, II, 14 (dated 1513). See Kenneth Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Penguin Books, 1959, Harmondsworth, UK).