

That time I scattered ashes in India, under the impression that life had meaning

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In September 1997, at the age of twenty-four, I flew to Mumbai with a box in the bottom of my rucksack containing the cremated remains of someone I had never met. Her name was Margaret. I had a passport photo of her in my wallet. It was taken during the last weeks of her final illness, which I suppose was cancer. In the photo, her hair is short and light brown, and her face, a ghostly colour, is angular and gaunt. I can see she is wearing a white sari. She smiles with a defiant blissfulness, but I sense that she is also grieving over her illness. I carried a certified letter folded up next to my passport from the crematorium in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, in case a customs official gave me any trouble. But my bag sailed through the scanners and no one said a word.

I was traveling to India to visit my father's family and to try to see as much of the country as I could. It's a trip I take every few years.

My flight was supposed to land in Mumbai in the dead of night, but it was delayed, so it ended up touching down in the blood-red light of a polluted sunrise. The slums sprawled beside the runway. They looked like the largest piece of public art ever created: fluttering sheets of torn plastic, corrugated leaves of steel, sections of pipe, all the detritus that function can be squeezed out of, built around a labyrinth of dusty footpaths and lakes of excrement.

The air inside the terminal made you sweat just to stand in it. I waited in a long immigration line, and it barely moved. The overhead fans were still. Two children played hide-and-seek around people's legs and carry-on luggage. There was nothing to do but count the people in front of you. Every once in a while the child who was "it" would find the other one who was hiding, and they would both squeal. The immigration officers pounded stamps onto documents with sluggish disregard. People trickled through and disappeared down a dark corridor towards the next phase of arrival.

It was still early when I made it outside. The sun was bright, and I couldn't see without squinting. My rucksack was heavy because of the ashes. When a human body is cremated, it's reduced to roughly 3.5 percent of its original mass. On average, the remains of an adult female weigh about four pounds, but Margaret's weighed nearly five, so I assume she was unusually tall. When the body is burned, the flesh is turned to gas, and what's left is calcium phosphate – essentially dry bone – that is then pulverized. It typically takes ninety

minutes to incinerate a human body, and twenty minutes to grind it into dust.

Taxi men swarmed around me as soon as I came out of the airport. I walked toward the parking lot in a straight line without speaking, and all of them fell away except one. I said, Good morning. I wanted to go to Colaba in southern Mumbai. I knew it was more than an hour's drive, but had little idea how much it should cost. I talked the driver down fifty rupees and we agreed. He unlocked the boot on his black and yellow Ambassador, but I told him I'd take the rucksack inside with me. He asked where I was going. I told him the Salvation Army Guest House. He said it was full. I laughed because I knew he was trying to steer me towards a hotel that would pay him a touting fee. He said the Salvation Army was very dirty. He was being honest about that. I said I'd give him an extra fifty rupees if he drove me there and didn't give me any hassles. If I had been in Kerala in South India, where my father is from, I would have tried to say something in my bad Malayalam, and the driver would have asked me questions and soon he would have known that my father was from Kerala, and we would have begun to treat each other like people. But Malayalam in Mumbai is useless, and I don't know a word of Hindi. When I offered the driver the extra fifty, I saw him look back at me in the mirror. He didn't say another word until we got to Colaba.

The density of Mumbai and other Indian cities is overwhelming. Shops are packed tightly together and their goods spill out the fronts

of them. Sometimes you'll pass ten shops in a row selling exactly the same things. People were just beginning to wake up. Many of them slept on soiled blankets on the sidewalks in front of the shops where they worked. I could feel the morning rush build over the course of the drive. The traffic thickened. There were more and more people headed somewhere.

The little I knew about Margaret, I learned from her friend Sheila, who I arranged to meet at the funeral home in New Jersey when I picked up the ashes. I got there before she did. A man who seemed unable to speak in any but consoling tones led me to a waiting room. I sat on an overstuffed red sofa. There were large potted plants with waxy leaves and a white empty floor-standing vase that came up to my sternum. Sheila arrived. She was somehow known to my parents' neighbours, but I had never met her before. She wore a floral dress and heavy makeup. She kissed me on the cheek and thanked me many times for agreeing to carry out Margaret's final wish. They were old friends, she said. She placed Margaret's tiny photo in my palm and we peered down into it together. She told me Margaret was very sick by the time that photo was taken. She suffered for a long time but never complained. Margaret went to India every year when she could. She loved it there. She stayed at an ashram and followed some kind of guru. I asked Sheila if she knew anything about the ashram, where it was or the name of the guru, but she didn't know. She thought it was somewhere maybe in the north. Margaret was origi-

nally from Australia, but lived in the US for a long time. She never married and had no children. She might have had no living family at all. I know nothing else about her. I asked Sheila if Margaret had a specific place in mind where she wanted her ashes to be scattered. The question seemed to surprise her. Oh, I don't know, I don't think so, she said, just someplace nice, someplace peaceful.

The landmass of southern Mumbai is shaped like a lobster claw forever threatening to snap shut upon the city's Back Bay. The Salvation Army is on the eastern side. It's an old four-story building that might have once been imposing and majestic but, like most things in India, has been left to slowly disintegrate. Its dorm beds are the cheapest night's sleep in Mumbai. The glitzy Taj Mahal Hotel, which was torched and marauded during the 2008 terrorist attacks, is just down the street. I had stayed at the Salvation Army a few years before and knew it was filthy and full of cockroaches, but in those days when traveling in India I sought out such places like a badge of honour, as if mingling with grime and deprivation brought me closer to India's mystical essence. India as the *omphalos* of spiritual discovery is one of the great cultural clichés of the world, and even though I'm half-Indian and I've visited regularly since I was a child, for a time I embraced this facile notion, probably because it was a way to shape India into something I could easily understand, and I couldn't accept that my father's homeland, and by extension a part of myself, was impenetrable.

Even after spending years of my life in India, it remains foreign to me and my identity with it will never be anything but deliberate and self-conscious. When I meet Westerners who profess a deep love for India, who claim to have a profound connection to the place and understand it, I want to humiliate them. If I met Margaret today, I think I would feel something like disgust. But back then I believed that scattering a person's last remains was of spiritual importance and therefore a grave responsibility.

My dorm room at the Salvation Army seemed a bit nicer than I expected. There were four sets of wooden bunk beds with thin, stale-smelling mattresses, but there was a large window, and the sunlight it afforded almost made the room feel cheery. A short, talkative Italian sat on one of the bunks with a small crowd around him. He said when he visited a place he made sure he saw everything there was to see because he would never come back. The life is too short, he said, to waste the time repeating. I slid my rucksack under my bed and chained it to one of the legs. The conversation turned to diarrhea – who'd had it, who hadn't, who had come down with the worst case. A Brit who spoke with a posh accent announced that he had once been formally diagnosed with giardiasis and a form of dysentery.

I walked north along Marine Drive as far as Chowpatty Beach. I was looking for a spot to scatter Margaret's ashes, but I thought if I left her anywhere here I would feel haunted. The water in the Back Bay was black and polluted. It looked like beef stew after it cools

down. And there were no peaceful areas, just bustle and chaos. From Chowpatty Beach, to the west, I could see Malabar Hill, which is the highest point in Southern Mumbai and probably one of the most exclusive and expensive residential neighbourhoods in the world. It's where Bollywood movie stars and business tycoons live. At the top of the hill, there's a large, still undeveloped area of dense vegetation, and hidden deep inside this tangle of jungle are the Parsee Towers of Silence. The Parsee people emigrated from Persia to India in the tenth century. They practice Zoroastrianism, which many consider to be the first monotheistic religion in the world and the first to preach a duality of good and evil. The Towers of Silence are where the Parsees dispose of the bodies of their dead.

Except under extraordinary circumstances, none but the Parsees are admitted onto their funeral grounds on Malabar Hill, and only a select few pallbearers are permitted into the towers. The first Westerner ever granted permission to enter the grounds might have been the son of Queen Victoria, Albert Edward. At the time, he was the Prince of Wales; later he'd become King Edward VII. His visit is described in a *New York Times* article from January 23, 1876. The prince, who had recently recovered from a near-fatal bout of typhoid, the same disease that killed his father, set off on an extended tour of India. He was granted permission to enter the grounds on Malabar Hill by the governing body of the Parsees and was given a formal tour. The reporter claims that the prince showed more inter-

est in the towers than in any other sight he visited during his eight months in India, and goes on to say that on the heels of the prince's visit, the reporter himself was granted permission to enter and given the identical tour. He describes what he saw: you proceed on foot up a long rocky ascent until you come to a gate with the warning, "None but Parsees may enter!" From this spot there is a most enchanting and unequalled view over Bombay, which every European visitor should see if he can. Two corpses were brought up the rocky ascent. The biers were carried by four men, and two others followed, who alone are allowed to enter the towers. The towers are circular, formed of huge stone slabs, well cemented together. In the external wall there is but one aperture, about five and a half feet square and thirteen feet from the ground and to this the carriers of the dead ascend by a flight of steps and there take in the corpse. The outside wall is from twenty-five to forty feet high, according to the inequalities of the ground. Inside is a circular platform, depressed gradually toward a centre where there is a well of about ten feet diameter. The surface of the platform consists of fluted grooves where the corpses are deposited. All the bodies are absolutely naked, to fulfill the saying, "Naked came I into the world, and naked shall I go forth"; and in half an hour from the time they are put in the grooves every particle of flesh is stripped from the bones by the numerous vultures that inhabit the spot. At least two hundred of these filthy birds congregated round the two bodies which had just been brought in, and in half an hour all

but a very few had retired from the feast gorged, and scarce able to flap their way to the surrounding trees. The skeleton is left to bleach in sun and wind till it becomes quite dry. Two carriers of the dead then enter with gloves on their hands and provided with bags, with which they carry the bones to the central well, where they are cast and crumble into dust. There are perforations in the wall of the well through which any moisture, caused by rain or otherwise, passes and descends into the two drains at the bottom of the building, where it passes through charcoal and so becomes disinfected and inodorous before it reaches the sea...

The Parsees do not cremate, inter, nor do they bury bodies at sea. They believe in the sacredness of the basic elements – earth, fire, water – and as such will not defile these elements with corpses, which are considered unclean and possibly possessed by demons. Instead, upon the Towers of Silence they expose the bodies of their loved ones as carrion for birds of prey. That such a place can exist in the heart of an exclusive residential district would be unimaginable anywhere but in India, where modernity is constantly hurling itself against the stubborn, ancient walls of tradition.

In 1975, one of the towers was closed because the residents living on the top floors of a newly built high-rise could see the rotting corpses over the tree line. And more recently, the entire grisly method of Parsee funereal disposal has been called into question due to

the decimation of the vulture population in India. An anti-inflammatory drug called Diclofenac, widely used in humans and livestock, has been shown to cause kidney failure in vultures that feast on the flesh of those treated with the drug. Today, the vultures of India are virtually extinct, and the corpses on the Towers of Silence, with nothing to devour them but a few pecking crows, take many months – sometimes over a year – to fully decompose. In 2006, Dhan Baria, a Parsee who was concerned about the dignity of her recently deceased mother's remains with no vultures left to consume it, caused a scandal by sneaking into one of the towers and taking gruesome photos and videos of the many bodies in various states of rot. Solar panels have since been erected to try to speed the rate of decomposition with limited results.

I had a few beers at the Leopold Café and was feeling drunk by the time I got back to my dorm room. It was late and everyone else was asleep. I took out the box with Margaret's ashes inside and placed it onto the bed. The box was about the size of four bricks laid together in a row on their sides. I took out my Swiss Army Knife and a small flashlight that I held between my teeth and shined onto the bed. I opened the box. The ashes were inside a clear plastic bag. A thick metal clip was bent around the open end of the bag to seal it. There was a small medallion with a serial number on it. I pried open the clip with one of the tools on the Swiss Army Knife and put my fingers inside the bag. The ashes were like fine sand, but there were larger

bits mixed in, which I suppose were nuggets of bone. I can remember closing my eyes and trying to say something like a prayer.

Today, I live in London and my apartment is very close to Nunhead Cemetery, which opened in 1840. Most of the cemetery looks like a nature preserve. Trees, brambles and vines mingle with the headstones, which jut out of the ground at odd angles. Many of the stone markers are blank, their inscriptions are worn away, and ivy crawls over them like ill-fitting wigs. There are spots along the trails where you can look deep into the overgrowth and see a mossy headstone that looks as though it's being pulled under the earth by the wild, twisting vegetation. Here, life flourishes unsentimental and untamable, and it has no use for death except to devour it. In this setting, the human impulse towards eulogizing the dead with a place in the earth and an inscribed stone feels like a pathetic sham, like a childish attempt to give grief and memory permanence. Nunhead Cemetery is a living monument to oblivion. I imagine what it must look like underground – the root systems, some delicate like spider webs, others as thick and powerful as tentacles, the clusters of gray bones like unmade jigsaws, and the dark geometry of rotting splinters rung with nails. It makes me remember a newspaper article my grandmother once showed me about the postmortem fate of my most famous ancestor, Roger Williams, a clergyman and linguist who founded the colony of Rhode Island. He is my mother's great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather,

and was one of the most extraordinary men in early colonial America. Before sailing from England in December 1630 due to his opposition to the Church of England, it's believed that for a time he tutored John Milton in Dutch. He arrived in Boston in February 1631, and over the course of the next five years succeeded in making himself unwelcome in every British settlement in Massachusetts through his radical religious and political views. He published a tract that openly questioned the validity of the King's charters and the legitimacy of British settlements without first purchasing the land from the Native Americans. He studied the Native's languages and customs and believed them as a people to be equal to Europeans. He was the first in America to publicly advocate for the separation of church and state, or as he put it, a hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world, and he preached the sanctity of personal human conscience. For his efforts, he was exiled, and in 1636, along with a dozen of his followers, founded Providence, which would later become the colony of Rhode Island. It was the first place in modern history to guarantee religious freedom and a separation of church and state. Roger Williams died in 1683 and was buried on his property. Within fifty years, his house had collapsed and the precise location of his grave forgotten. But in the mid-nineteenth century, one hundred and seventy-seven years after Roger Williams's death, his descendants decided to construct a memorial to him in Prospect Park, which overlooks Providence. They set out to exhume

his remains and reinter them at the memorial site. During excavations, they discovered the foundations of his house and the family graveyard, and through oral history were able to identify the exact location of his tomb. But Roger Williams's remains were gone. The root of an apple tree had consumed them. Zachariah Allen, an early president of the Rhode Island Historical Society, who led the 1860 excavation, described what he saw: This tree had pushed downward one of its main roots in a sloping direction towards the precise spot that had been occupied by the skull of Roger Williams. There making a turn conforming with its circumference, the root followed the direction of the back bone to the hips, and thence divided into two branches, each one following a leg bone to the heel, where they both turned upwards to the extremities of the toes of the skeleton. One of the roots formed a slight crook at the part occupied by the knee joint, thus producing an increased resemblance to the outlines of the skeleton of Roger Williams, as if, indeed, moulded thereto by the powers of vegetable life. Nothing useful as food for plants is wastefully lost in the economy of nature, and even our very graves are ransacked by rambling roots, as well as by the crawling worms, that convert every charnel house into a banqueting hall.

For a man like Roger Williams, who refused to sit for a single portrait during his lifetime because he considered it vain, and for whom there is no extant physical description, I believe he would have been mor-

tified by the idea of a monument in his honour and probably would have taken delight in knowing that his eulogizers' plans were faintly subverted by the tree root that had annihilated what was left of his physical form. And I hope he would appreciate the macabre humor of the root on display in a coffin-shaped box in the John Brown House Museum in downtown Providence.

I scattered most of Margaret's ashes at Vagator Beach in Goa. My plan was to release them into the holy Ganges River, but I was heading south to visit my father's family, and the ashes were too heavy and took up too much space in my rucksack to lug them all the way south and then all the way back north again. My train from Mumbai to Belgaum was delayed by twenty-four hours, and from Belgaum I suffered through an uncomfortable and crowded bus journey over the Western Ghats into Goa. It was well before tourist season, so the beaches around Vagator were nearly empty. A few ancient, leathery hippies skulked in and out of the barren cafés. One morning, I watched a particularly sun-scorched woman with thick, ropey dreadlocks perform an extended interpretive dance on the beach seemingly for the sole benefit of the rising sun.

For the scattering of the ashes, cliché and formula were my guides. I chose a jagged hill by the sea, which rose up somewhat dramatically between two sandy coves. I bought a book of Bhakti poetry in hopes of finding a snatch or two of verse that might be appropriate as part of a ceremony, but I couldn't make any sense of it. On the morning

of the day I was to unburden myself of the task I neither wanted nor understood, I sat cross-legged on my bed and attempted, for perhaps the first time in my life, to meditate, but it made my back hurt, and when I tried to clear my mind, I ended up thinking about girls and food. When I finally climbed the hill with the box of ashes under my arm, it was nearly noon and very hot. I had brought along a small drawstring pouch I picked up at the Anjuna Market a few beaches to the south. I decided I would save a bit of ash for the Ganges, and when I got to the top of the hill, I sprinkled some inside the pouch and put it into my pocket.

I cupped the clear plastic bag full of gray ash in front of me and tried to create in my mind a sensation of solemnity. I touched my middle and index fingers to my forehead and then to my chest. I had seen people do that before in front of sacred spots inside temples around India. Finally, I took hold of the sealed end of the plastic bag and hurled the ashes towards the sea. But in my preoccupation with instilling profundity to the moment, I failed to notice that the wind was blowing in, and the full load of ash spattered into my face and torso like a worn-out gag from a bad movie. I was sweaty from the climb and the ash stuck to me. I can remember looking around in embarrassment while trying to dust myself off. But I was the only witness to my blundering.

Later that afternoon, I met a Swedish Lutheran minister named Linus. We went to a café on one of the cliffs and drank cashew fenni,

a local spirit that tasted like some kind of industrial fluid. He had been staying in Goa for a long time working for an organization that supported westerners who were incarcerated in Goa's Aguada Prison. The prison compound sits at the edge of the Mandovi River where it joins the Arabian Sea on the site of what was once the citadel of a seventeenth-century Portuguese fort. There were twelve foreigners serving ten-year sentences for the possession of narcotics. Although drug use, especially among westerners, is very open in many parts of Goa, Linus told me that high-ranking officials would occasionally put pressure on the local police to crack down. Most of the prisoners claimed the police planted the drugs on them, and when they wouldn't pay them a bribe, they were arrested. I asked Linus if he believed them. He shrugged. Some of them, maybe, he said, who knows? He told me the prison cells were crowded and full of rats, and the prisoners slept on the floor. They were permitted to go outside into a courtyard a couple hours a week. There was nothing to do in their cells all day. Many of them had no family nearby, so Linus would volunteer to meet them during their one monthly visit, which lasted an hour. He said, although the conditions in the prison were bad, the greatest suffering came from the boredom and the way long stretches of empty time can cause the mind to attack itself. Linus was pale and had a shaved head. There was no one else in the café. Our empty glasses stood on the table like chess pieces. They were smudged and cloudy from our fingers and lips. One day

they'll get out, he said. I'm just here to try to remind them that the world still exists.

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