Great cries spread through the air and mighty black vultures sweep above the heads of the processions. Nobody pays attention to them. The eerie, frightful birds chase through the air like black cloths, screeching at the earth and the sea. The sinister birds rush off, their flight is like the sweep a big, black scythe.

Max Dauthenday, »Lingam«

ON THE FOUR END OF THE DEATHBED
HANG, FACE DOWN NEXT TO SOME BURNING INCENSE STICKS, FOUR BUNCHES OF WHITE LILIES.
WHEN THE RELATIVES MUTTERING PRAYERS HAVE SAID THEIR GOODBYES TO THE DECEASED AND TOUCHED HER HEAD, A COUPLE OF MEN PICK UP THE PIECE OF CLOTH THE DEAD WOMAN IS LYING ON, ON THE FOUR ENDS AND PUT THE BODY CLAD IN A WHITE DRESS ONTO THE PYRE.
»I escape to the tree-lined road that leads along the river to the ghat where bodies are burned. A mother is waiting for firewood for her dead child. Another ‘gravesite’ has just devoured the body of a well-known merchant from Shyambazar. A family member is poking the still-glowing embers and discovers bones that are partially white still.«

WITH THE DRIVER ISLAM and the intern from the Max Mueller Bhavan, Dorothea, we drive to the Nimtala ghat, where the dead are cremated at the riverbank of the holy river Hooghly by the Dom. A fifteen-year-old girl, who has just bathed and washed herself in the Hooghly, ducks and climbs through the gates of a railway crossing and laughs as she wrings out a cloth while the young men call out to her pertly. The young men look at her well-rounded buttocks that the wet, see-through garment is clinging to. The umbrella patcher, wearing a blue and white-checked piece of cloth around his hips, squatting by the roadside next to the train tracks with a smoking bidi in his mouth, is repairing the delicate frame of an umbrella with his rusty tools. The knob of the umbrella lies on the asphalt. He takes new silver sticks from his plastic bag, inserts them into the frame and throws the broken and bent sticks onto the train tracks. By the roadside, a man, pushing two giant tyres tied together next to him, crosses the path of another man, who is carrying a raffia basket filled with bananas on his head. The raffia basket is covered with a coarse-meshed net. A car with a high, glazed trailer in which lies a dead man in an open, sparsely decorated casket is driving towards the Nimtala ghat, the crematorium, accompanied by a police car sounding its siren.

Kolkata’s cremation sites at the riverbank of the Hooghly are under the control of the Dom, who belong to the caste of Untouchables in India. The Dom sell wood, collect a fee for every body cremated and guard the eternal holy fire with which all pyres are lit. The bodies of several men and women, adorned all over with flowers, are lying on beds in a hall in front of the cremation site. On one of the beds, half-covered with garlands of white rose petals, lies an old man, his face exposed. Horn-rimmed glasses rest on his chest and a black, tattered umbrella on his legs. At the cremation site, which is located right next to the riverbank behind the open funeral hall, there is a bamboo-framed bed decorated with garlands of yellow marigolds, on which lies an old, bespectacled man with a leaden complexion who is being carried down the hill to the riverbank by six men who keep yelling »Ram Naam Satya Hai!« One of the bearers pours the holy water of the Hooghly onto the dead man adorned with garlands of yellow marigolds from a brown earthen jug. A few men, who move aside to make room for the body, are washing their clothes and lathering their moth-eaten banyans full of holes right next to the
dead man, who is immersed into the river along with the bed. The relatives of the deceased,
repeatedly yelling »Ram Naam!«, lift the bed, which has only become heavier with the water,
with the deceased on it and carry it over the hill to the cremation site, where several pyres are
burning. A small boy also touches the bamboo frame of the heavy deathbed, river water is
trickling down from it, and helps the men carry it. The screeches of the crows and the laughter
of the children washing their clothes, bathing and splashing in the river can be heard every now
and again.

At the cremation site of the Nimtala ghat, where four pyres are burning, there are two large,
thick concrete screens studded with sharp pieces of glass as a protection against crows. Still,
several crows are gathered here and there amidst the shards of glass. Two goats eat the garlands
of orange marigolds and rose petals lying on the ground among the burning pyres. One of the
goats deliberately chewing along has a garland that is getting shorter and shorter by the minute
hanging from its mouth. A few sadhus clad in orange are sitting at the foot of one of the concrete
screens, they are smoking a pipe with marihuana, which they pass along from man to man, and
keep yelling »Om Namah Shivaya!«. Off the empty beds on which the dead were lying, still
covered with flowers, black goats are feeding on ruby-coloured rose petals and marigolds.
Behind the three, four-metre-high orange flames of a pyre you can see long, thick bundles of
reeds leaning against the wall of the funeral hall. A young Dom, dressed in a pair of knee-length
trousers with a dragon pattern, a sun tattooed on his upper arm, is putting several thin logs of
wood onto the head of a burning body. He rips the pyre apart with a singed bamboo rod, the
burning body slides deeper into the blaze. In a flash the whole body is singed, sizzling flesh and
boiling blood become visible. When another lad makes to stick a second parcel of incense sticks
into the burning pyre, a loitering boy rips the sandalwood incense sticks from his hand before
they can touch the pyre and the now unclean fire and runs off into an alley with them. The
young man, a member of the occupational group of the Dom who cremate the dead at the
Nimtala ghat, knocks the lid off a tin of ghee, opens the clasps and pours ghee onto the burning
corpse. Immediately, orange-yellow flames shoot into the sky, the pyre is blazing fiercely. He
pours the rest of the ghee onto the pyre, taps the tin with a piece of singed wood to empty it and
throws it aside. At once, a sadhu, all skin and bones, smudged with the ash of the dead, smoking
marihuana, appears and gathers the three empty ghee tins, but the young incense-stick thief is
right there once more and rips the empty tins out of the helpless old man’s hands. Satisfied,
persistently looking at the burning pyre, the brown goat is chewing the garlands of yellow
marigolds. The Dom re-erects the pyre with a long bamboo stick, pushes the dead body’s torso,
which has become armless by now, aside, shovels the singed logs of wood he had thrown to the side before back onto the pyre and manoeuvres the more or less burning corpse back on top. When the fire has burned down completely, a family member of the deceased bundles up the bone fragments, ash and pieces of black charcoal in a jute rag, carries the remains to the bank of the Hooghly and tips them into the holy river amid the bathing children. Pieces of charcoal float among the lather, the orange marigold petals and the ruby-coloured rose petals. At once, the women and men washing their clothes begin to look for valuables at the place where the remains of the dead have been tipped from the jute rag, in the brown-grey water they feel the material at the bottom of the river with their naked feet. The wet piece of jute that held the deceased’s ash is thrown onto a pile of rubbish. Thirty, forty meters in the distance a large boat chugs past billowing clouds of black smoke.

Since one of the pyres won’t catch on fire, one of the Doms picks up a bundle of long, thick, white-dry reeds leaning against the wall of the electrical crematorium, snaps the roots off the reeds covered in dry earth and pushes the entire bundle in between the large logs lying at the bottom of the pyre. Huge, broad orange flames flare up from below. One of the four coconuts lying on the pyre rolls to the ground. The Dom picks up the hot, brown coconut with his bare hands, drops it with pain and, dancing in a circle, bites his burned fingers, tries one more time and shoves the singed, slightly smoking coconut between two logs. After he has spent a while poking the fire with the bamboo stick, he pulls the heavily smoking shreds of clothes that smother the flames off the deceased’s body and from the pyre with his bare hands. Only when the Dom, singing a song in Bengali, chucks a few handfuls of sandalwood powder into the lower area of the wooden structure do the flames take hold of the wood and the pyre begins to burn with a loud crackle. A crow flies through the acrid smoke, flakes of ash whirl through the air. Every now and again, the bleating of a goat can be hear, logs of wood being thrown on top of each other to create a new fire pit, the screeching crows. Biting into the tail of her sari fearfully, a woman approaches the pyre but turns back around quickly and retreats to the riverbank. An advertisement for underwear – »Lux cozi« – is printed on a large billboard on a passing boat. All the passengers on the boat, who have risen from their seats, are staring at the burning ghat mesmerised. A few family members of the body now burning are sitting near me, curiously looking at my fountain pen and my notebook whose cover depicts a boy at the seashore, wet, laughing cheekily, sitting among images of Ganesh decorated all over with garlands of flowers. We are all shrouded by ash particles flying through the air. The sadhu with an orange-coloured scarf around his forehead, smoking marihuana, is spinning around in circles.
absentmindedly. Without looking around, a bald man throws an earthen jug filled with the Hooghly’s holy water over his shoulder and onto the burned-down pyre at the first fire pit and leaves the cremation site.

Once more, some men can be heard from far away, yelling: »Ram Naam Satya Hai!« On a bed overladen with flowers a dead old woman is carried to the cremation site with the aid of two bamboo sticks slid underneath the bed. On the head and on the feet of the deceased lie wreaths of white rose petals. Four bunches of white lilies hang from the four feet of the bed next to burning incense sticks. When the family members murmuring prayers have said their goodbyes to the deceased and touched her head, a few men grab the cloth on all four corners and lift the body clad in a white dress onto the prepared pyre. Each family member puts a piece of sandalwood on the body of the deceased whose face sports deep-set eyes, sunken cheeks and a toothlessly sunken mouth. The deceased’s two sons with shaven heads, wearing nothing but a seamless piece of white cloth around their naked hips, push burning reeds in between the wood on the pyre. A couple of young men approach the pyre, touch the mango wood, fold their hands, touch their own foreheads with their fingers and murmur a prayer. Wedged in between logs of wood lie some large brown cocoanuts as offerings. Two tourists, a man and a woman wearing a garland of orange marigolds around her neck, sit down on the long stone bench in front of the burning pyre, but get up again after just a few minutes and leave the Nimtala ghat. The flames flare up when the Dom pouts ghee onto the slowly burning pyre by the litre. In the far-right corner of the ghat, the thin, shy sadhu smoking marihuana in a pipe squats furtively and waits for the next tins of ghee that are just being opened now. Three stark naked boys appear, climb a wall behind the concrete screens and jump into the river. They run up the stairs, past the brightly burning pyre and jump from the three-metre-high balustrade once more. The boys are splashing in the river among the pieces of charcoal and the remains of the flowers, hitting each other on their backs with the wet rags they use to cover up their hips and scream gleefully. One of them audibly gargles with the dirty river water, another, covered from head to toe in white lather, jumps into the river splashing and yelling. A man is standing knee-deep in the river between the swimming pieces of charcoal and dishevelled flower garlands, talking on the phone, he scolds the romping boys who keep splashing him with water. Two young men scoop water from the river with a large, broad metal bucket and carry the full buckets up the stairs. The three naked boys pull garlands – like entrails – of yellow and orange marigolds from the bucket before the two men pour the water onto a burned-down, still slightly smoking fire pit. A Dom picks some remains from the burned-down pyre and pushes them onto a tiled step with
the bamboo stick. One of the dead woman’s bald-shaven sons, wearing nothing but a seamless piece of white cloth around his hips, pours the Hooghly’s holy water onto the charred remains of his mother from an earthen jug. I am besieged from all sides and am afraid of finding myself in the tussle when a fight breaks out between two Doms. The young Dom who cremated the deceased is not satisfied with the twenty Rupees he was given and keeps pushing the other aside, wrestles him to the ground before a third Dom arrives, settles the dispute and pacifies him with an additional bank note.

I leave the cremation site of the Nimtala ghat at the bank of the Hooghly with ash particles on my writing hand, the driver Islam and the intern from the Max Mueller Bhavan, Dorothea, who are driving me through Kolkata, are already waiting. Driving between two big lorries in the air-conditioned car, all of us, the driver, Dorothea and I, keep looking left and right, irritated, afraid of being squashed by the heavy lorries with the densely billowing, black exhaust fumes. The glass Ganesh on the car’s windscreen keeps flashing, changing between green, purple, red and pink. When I tell the intern about my observation that even dead Muslims are carried through the streets on beds, she asks if Muslims were cremated too. Islam, the driver, immediately answers sharply, before she has even finished her question: »No!« Islam tells us that on the festival of the Goddess Durga the large effigies of Durga made from straw and gypsum and painted in bright colours are paid for by businesses and clubs. Apparently, in some boroughs, collectors go from door to door and intimidate and threaten people if they don’t donate money for the effigies. Two men with plastic bags on their heads are standing in the middle of the road holding up bundles of cauliflowers and knocking on the windows of the cars waiting at the traffic lights. By the wall of a large building, a rickshaw driver, who has returned to his family during his break and is playing with his baby, whom he keeps lifting up laughing, has built a small raffia hut plastered with posters of Bollywood movies. It is pouring with rain, finally the eagerly anticipated monsoon rains, the raindrops can be heard loudly on the roofs and on the windows of the cars. The windscreen wipers are racing to and fro on the broad windscreen and barely manage to keep up with the downpour. On one of the houses I can make out the blurry inscription »Calcutta School of Tropical Medicine« among the raindrops pattering hard as needles and immediately flowing apart. A rickshaw driver, who has tied a high pile of laced-up, grey egg cartons covered with a clear plastic tarp to his vehicle, is driving past a lorry laden with big tar barrels. Surrounded by a herd of twenty black, soaking wet sheep stands a rusty tank in the Maidan, the largest urban park in Kolkata.