
THE PAST SELF THAT PUZZLES, THE PRESENT SELF THAT UNRAVELS: ON THE MURDERS OF A MISSIONARY AND HIS SONS

DEAN RADER

Rural India. Midnight. No lights. No electricity. Inexpressibly dark. On the outskirts of a small village, a lone Jeep, silent beneath a canopy of trees. Inside the Jeep, a man and his two young sons sleep in the back end. It is January. Unusually cold. Before settling in, the man stuffs straw beneath the Jeep as a crude form of insulation. He piles even more on top.

This is a mistake.

A group of men who have been hiding in the trees quietly emerge. They surround the Jeep. They barricade the doors.

Metal rods. Thick wooden sticks.

They light the straw on fire.

Slowly the Jeep begins to burn.

Slowly, the man burns. His oldest son burns. His youngest son burns.

The year is 1999. The place is Manoharpur village in the state of Orissa, now named Odisha. The date is January 23. The man killed in the burning Jeep is named Graham Staines. He is fifty-eight years old. He is a missionary from Australia. His oldest son is named Phillip.

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He is ten years old. He has blond hair. He wears glasses. His younger brother is Tim. He is six.

Witnesses testify the group of men who set the Jeep ablaze danced and jeered as the vehicle burned and the man and his sons screamed for help.

The year is 1999. The place is the Mayurbhanj Leprosy Home in Baripada. The date is January 13. Graham Staines holds an arrow made by one of the virtually fingerless men he helped cure of leprosy. Tim and Phillip kick a soccer ball in the dust about ten feet away. Between the boys and Graham is another white man. His name is Dean Rader. He will appear in the last known photo of Graham, Phillip, and Tim.

At midnight on January 22, 1999, Graham, Phillip, Tim, and I are all asleep. They sleep in a Jeep outside a distant village. I sleep in a safe, comfortable house in Raipur, India. On the morning of January 23, I wake.

On the morning of January 23, they do not.

I think about this fact, in some way, almost every day of my life: When I see the country of India on a map. When I read about sectarian violence in India. When I hear the word “missionary.” When I hear the word “Jeep.” For years, any Australian accent would transport me back to my last conversation with Graham. Him in the driver seat of the Jeep. Me in the passenger. My sons are the same ages right now as Phillip and Tim when they died. For the longest time, when I strapped the youngest one in his car seat, I would see Tim. Those thoughts would go away as quickly as they came. But they always came. They still come. Whenever we go camping, I’m a little scared something might happen. It is irrational. But it is. In fact, when I hear the word “gram” or “stains,” regardless of context, I think of him. And then, as soon as I think of him, I see a man and two boys being burned alive. I

96 will never sleep in a car.

When I think of any detail about my two months in India, it begins and ends with their murder.

Originally from Brisbane, Graham Staines was well-known around Baripada and the entire state of Odisha. He had been given the nickname “Saibo,” and it was not uncommon for passers-by to greet him as such. He and his faded blue Jeep were iconic not only in the city but also in the villages, where he would venture—sometimes as far as six hours away and often with his family in tow—on a dual mission of talking to villagers about Christianity and searching for men, women, and children with leprosy. Odisha is one of the more remote areas of India, and has some of the highest rates of leprosy in the world. Leprosy was (and still is) largely misunderstood in rural India, especially along what some people call the “tribal belt,” where most villages lack electricity, running water, phone service, and easy access to metropolitan centers. One of India’s largest tribal areas is in Odisha among the Santhal tribe. In almost all cases in these tribal areas, leprosy victims are outcast, even killed. Some of the most sacred texts like the *Atharva Veda* and *The Laws of Manu*, both of which date back to around 2000 and 1500 BCE, denounce diseases of the skin, the descriptions of which match up all too well with those of leprosy. Early laws forbade coming in to contact with people exhibiting such diseases. Villages ostracized leprosy victims out of a belief they were being punished for past sins. Karma of a sort. Suicides, not normally condoned in Hindu teachings, are acceptable for lepers. In other words, all normal laws and social codes go out the window in the face of leprosy.

Unless you are Graham Staines.

When Graham arrived in Odisha in 1965, leprosy—particularly in the tribal areas—was not on many people’s radar. Almost immediately

he committed his missionary practice to this endeavor. In 1985 he helped establish Mayurbhanj Leprosy Home, a remarkable place, which served two main functions. Graham would rescue—I don’t think that is too strong of a word—someone with leprosy from the vast tribal areas surrounding Baripada and bring them to the home, where they would be treated by a local physician named Dr. Das. Upon being cured, she or he was then taught culturally relevant skills that helped sustain the home. If your village was known for making wagon wheels, you were taught to craft wagon wheels. If your village made bows and arrows, you learned that trade. If your village was known for weaving, then even with your mangled fingers, you were taught how to weave. On the days we visited, there were probably fifty men and women outside working on a host of projects. I still have a basket made from Sabai grass that I bought from a woman whose face and fingers were barely recognizable as either. I remember shaking hands with men who had stubs instead of fingers. I will never forget the rough palms or the thumbs and forearms covered in bumps, entire bodies ravaged by the disease. I also remember Phillip and Tom, outside in the ubiquitous dust, playing with some of the children living at the home. It was this home, famous in Odisha, that brought us to Baripada. It was this home that led us to Graham. And it was this home and what people feared its real mission was that led to his death.

If you were to ask me before this trip what my thoughts were about white missionaries in rural India, I would not have responded favorably. I teach and write about Indigenous American literature, and it is impossible to do so and not have strong feelings about the role of the Church in the forced conversions of Native peoples, not to mention the church’s participation in Indigenous enslavement, eradication, and cultural erasure. I said as much to Graham during our only tense conversation:

Can I ask you a rude question?

Yes, he said, laughing but wary.

How do you reconcile Christianity's treatment of nonbelievers with your mission? I mean, the Church does not have a great history in terms of missionaries and Indigenous populations. Aren't you worried what people see when they see a missionary? A white missionary in rural India? The historical connotations are not, you know, the best.

Long pause. He had been asked this before. Probably by himself.

That is one lens, he said. Seen through that lens, being a missionary means being on a mission to convert people to your way of thinking, your system of belief. I don't think that way. Unfortunately, I guess there is no better word than missionary. But, I am not interested in conversion. Of course, I know the history of the Church, but that is not my history.

It seems, I said smugly, like it might be impossible for it not to be.

I can see why you might say that, he said. But, to me, God and the Church are two different things. I only follow one of those.

In 1999, I was a relatively recent Ph.D. trying to publish both poems and scholarly articles with little success, but I had landed a job teaching at a small liberal arts college in Texas. My department chair was active in the local Rotary chapter. He informed me one day that their Rotary district had been approved for a Group Exchange Program to India, specifically to the states of Odisha and Madhya Pradesh. The purpose of the trip was to tour various projects set up by local Rotary clubs and make recommendations for additional funding by Rotary International. In essence, we were evaluating the efficacy of NGOs.

I knew nothing about NGOs in India.

Why me? I asked my chair.

Because, he replied, I know you are interested in India, and you would be a stable presence for the team.

The latter was debatable, but the former was certainly true. In graduate school, I had tried to teach myself Sanskrit and failed. But I had read various Indian novels, religious texts, and poems. I was intrigued but felt profoundly unqualified to make any recommendations about anything in India except what American poets I thought Indian university students should be reading.

So, I changed what I was reading.

I discovered that unlike my hometown in Oklahoma, where Rotary is pretty much a sanctioned excuse for local businesspeople to sing songs over lunch and host baseball tournaments, Rotary clubs in India act as high functioning organizations that often supplement or take the place of hospitals, water treatment plants, optical services, women's resources, and support systems for children. Ultimately, I decided it was too unique of an opportunity to pass up. Within a couple of weeks, I learned I would be going to India as part of a small fact-finding team.

The team was fascinating. Megan was a journalist living in San Antonio. She was (and is) smart, focused, and edgy. She is a straight shooter who does not suffer fools and who has long been deeply committed to social justice. The other non-Rotarian, Becca, was also from San Antonio and still lives there. In 1999, she was a community organizer. She was the kindest of the four of us, the most interested in children, the most avid photographer, the most patient. The team leader, Bob, was a CPA in San Antonio. He was tall, close to six-foot-four, and easy going. He was more conservative than we were, and he was the only Rotarian. Somehow, he acquired the nickname Rotary Bob, and that name followed him like a wounded dog across India. I never knew how old Bob was. I would guess early fifties. Megan, Becca, and I in our late twenties/early thirties. We were all three fairly left-leaning and eager. We were excited to learn more about India. We were clueless. We had no idea what awaited us.

We arrived in Baripada in mid-January.

Graham and the boys would be dead in less than two weeks.

In Baripada, Becca and Megan stayed with Graham, Gladys (Graham's wife), and their kids. Graham was very active in the local Rotary chapter, and had even served as president. Bob and I stayed with Binod Das, a local physician who worked with Graham at the leprosy home. They were the two main figures at the Mayurbhanj Leprosy Home and on the inside of one of the most remarkable projects we had ever seen.

In our four days at Baripada, I got to know Graham well. He and I connected on a number of different issues and had long, intense discussions that moved from language to translation to Indigenous rights to spiritual practices to the effects of poetry to the presence of God to the role of literacy in the empowerment of women and the poor. Although we had many conversations, they were all different versions of the same concept, an obsession with the fraught triangulation of language, culture, and Indigenous communities.

One of our first conversations was all about the problems of translation. Graham was an astonishing linguist. He could speak Hindi, Santali (the local dialect of the Santali people), and Odia, the vernacular language of Odisha. He had also spent a great deal of time working on a translation of the Bible into Ho, still another language spoken in Odisha. One of the ironic details about Ho is that it uses the Warang Citi alphabet, which was developed in the 13th century as an alternate form of writing to the ones used by Christian missionaries for indoctrination. So, Graham, the missionary, was conversing in and translating into a language devised to subvert people like him. I always admired that. Villagers normally skeptical of a tall fair-skinned Christian responded to Graham because he spoke their language and understood their customs. Indeed, Graham knew more local languages and dialects than anyone else we met on the entire trip.

And herein lies the great tension about my feelings regarding Graham. I have always aligned missionaries with the colonial project—both are about subjugation and submission toward subaltern groups. Even though the Rotarians I met and stayed with were kind and generous, it was hard not to see in Rotary elements of paternalism and American capitalist imperialism. Is the line between missionary and Rotarian clear? Graham was both. How different could they be? How similar might they seem to locals? It is impossible to know for sure. But, doesn't the colonizer always think he's the savior?

The past self that puzzles and the present self that unravels are at odds with each other most of the time. But they are also two sides of the same coin. Heads or tails, you are still left with incomplete information and unanswered questions.

Our last day in Baripada. Graham and me in his Jeep:

Your work is more important than mine, I say to him.

We bounce along a dirt road. Silence.

Why do you say that?

First, you are good at yours, and I am not so good at mine, I reply.

I doubt that, he says quickly.

Second, no matter how many people read my writing, no matter how many students are moved by what I teach them, I will never have the kind of impact that you do.

More silence.

He turns to me.

The difference, he said, is that we see mine. I see it. You see it. You will rarely see or meet your readers, and you will never see how your teaching might change your students. They may not even know until it happens. I see the change now. You have the luxury of the future.

I wish we could stay here longer. I feel like I'm learning things, I told him.

I wish you could come with me to the jungle, he said. I think you would learn more.

Pause.

Though the days are long, he said. Another pause.

And you would be very uncomfortable sleeping in my Jeep.

What I know:

On the morning of January 22, Graham, Phillip, and Tim climb into the family Jeep and drive to Manoharpur village, about 150 miles from Baripada. They are going to what Graham called a “jungle camp,” which he described as a three- or four-day program of singing, dancing, prayer, and Bible instruction.

That night, after the last dance ends, Graham and the boys eat dinner with a local family and go to their Jeep for the night. It is a cold night. With the help of the villagers, they pile straw on top of the Jeep to help insulate its cabin. Around 9:30, Graham and the boys fold down the back seats and settle in to sleep.

What I don't know:

What they talked about as they huddled together after a long day of dancing, talking, and singing. What they loved or hated about jungle camp. What the boys thought of their father, this towering, almost magical and mythical figure. What they feared when they first heard something outside the Jeep. When Graham realized what was happening. What he said to the boys as they hugged him. What they said to each other as they saw the first flame. What would I say to my sons as we burn?

Reports vary slightly, but not much.

Around 12:20 A.M. on the twenty-third, a mob emerges from the distant fields. The size of the group depends on the source. Human Rights Watch claims the number is over a hundred. I think it is closer to ten or twenty.

Regardless, as the Staines sleep, the mob splits into two sections: one sets up a kind of wall to block the villagers, the other group carries torches. They surround the Jeep. Witnesses say two whistles blow, signaling the group at the Jeep to light the straw on top. More straw is brought in and added to the mass under the chassis.

It, too, is set fire.

According to Australian journalist Christopher Kremmer who interviewed villagers, Graham and the boys try to escape, but the group surrounding the Jeep blocks them from exiting, just as the wall of men in front of the village—which has neither electricity nor phone service—blocks the villagers from any attempt at rescue.

There are reports that Graham pleads for the mob to let the boys go. The men do not let the boys go.

Some accounts say that as the fire grows, the group taunts the family. I believe that is possible.

Another account claims Graham and the boys are stabbed before they are burned. I also believe this is possible.

Do I hope this is false, or do I hope this is true?

According to *India Today*, the remains of Graham, Phillip, and Tim were intertwined: “the three bodies lay clinging to each other in what must have been a vain attempt to protect each other and escape the mob.”

The magazine runs a photo of the charred remains.

Their murder becomes an international story that we become part of.

“Bajrang Dal Zindabad!”

This is what the mob chanted as the Jeep burned.

This means “Long Live the Bajrang Dal.”

The Bajrang Dal is the youth wing of the Hindu nationalist organization known as the Vishva Hindu Parishad or VHP. The VHP is an extreme organization that promotes Hindu supremacy and seeks to eradicate outside religious influencers like Muslims or Christians

104 or Communists.

As the mob chanted, the Jeep burned.

As the Jeep burned, the mob chanted.

After the fire subsided, likely around 1:20 A.M., the mob very quickly retreated back into the darkness of the fields. The assassination, the hit, the killings, lasted an hour, which seems excruciating.

Because there were no phones, no internet, no way to deliver news quickly, the police did not learn about the killings until the next morning. *India Today* reports a messenger was dispatched around 3:30 A.M., after the villagers thought it was safe. But everything is so far away, and nothing moves rapidly. The police did not arrive at the murder site until 11 A.M. on the twenty-third.

Gladys and Esther had stayed back in Baripada, but they did receive a cryptic message that there had been an incident with the Jeep. Later that day they would get the news.

I did not get the news until January 25, two days after the murders actually happened. It took that long for the news to travel from Manoharpur village to us, in Raipur, where I was staying with a local family. When I came down to breakfast the morning of the twenty-fifth, the family who had been warm and gracious the night before was somewhere between ashen and petrified. They were standing at the kitchen counter. Heads bowed. No one greeted me. No one would even look at me. The television was on, which was odd. The family whispered to each other for several minutes. Eventually, the father, who never actually moved from the kitchen and was unable to look at me, spoke:

A terrible, a tragic event has occurred, he said.

Immediately, I feared one of my parents had been hospitalized or died. But it was not my family.

The man whom you stayed with in Baripada is dead.

Dr. Das? I asked.

No, he said puzzled. The missionary. Mr. Staines.

Oh no, I said. Shocked.

How?

He was killed.

Killed?

Also, his sons.

What?

Yes.

I don't understand.

They were killed. In their Jeep. While they slept.

No. What? What?

I'm sorry.

The boys? The boys and Graham? Killed? How?

I am so sorry. Someone from Rotary is coming over now. There is to be a meeting with your group. You may be in danger.

The wait for the rest of our team and the Rotary leadership is excruciating.

I sit on a pale sofa. I watch a report about the murders on CNN International. There is a photograph of Graham. There is a photograph of Tim, Phillip. A shot of the charred Jeep. The leprosy home. The scenes of my life just a few days ago. A visual map of where I was, who I was with is now in a news story in India. Around the world.

Finally, the team arrives. Becca, almost running. She comes to me on the sofa. Head on my shoulder. She begins to cry uncontrollably.

The conversation with the Rotarians is a blur.

I remember being shocked and horrified and utterly baffled, but I have a hard time describing what I was feeling. Loss, I think. Despair. But I worry this is me twenty years later injecting these emotions

106 backward into the scene. I will say that it was a moment I will never forget, but I don't even know what that means. All I can say is that I had the distinct sense that something in me had died. However, I also remember feeling like that was ridiculous since I only knew this man and his kids for four days—four days.

The other feeling—and it was not immediate but close to that—is an awareness that I was frightened, though I could not have said, on that sofa at that moment, why. Why, after this great tragedy, am I thinking about myself? Why am I scared? How scared were Tim and Phillip?

By the time everyone arrived, it was clear that Rotary International, the local Rotary district in Raipur, the Rotary district we were about to visit, and the Rotary district back in Texas had learned of the situation and had been in touch with each other.

It was confirmed: our lives were at risk.

Everyone wanted us out of India.

Rotary International, the local Rotary clubs, and especially the district back in Texas.

The following day we were scheduled to make a long, six-hour drive from Raipur to Jagdalpur, which at the time, was in the state of Madhya Pradesh. We were told that there had been anti-Christian activities in Madhya Pradesh, that Catholic missionaries had been killed and that we could be in danger. There was no way to protect us, and to be sure, we stood out.

Four Anglos in an area in which there just simply were no Anglos—unless they were missionaries. We were not missionaries, but who would know?

Would driving us to Jagdalpur be safe? Had we been marked? Were we a target?

They recommended we cut the trip short. Plans were already in motion to extricate us as soon as possible. Our team leader, Bob,

wanted to go home. He had a wife and kids, and things were profoundly uncertain. But to his credit, he did not pull rank. We talked for a very long time. Eventually, he suggested we take a vote about completing the trip or going home.

I knew the vote would not be unanimous. I knew there would be potential tension. I knew whatever happened, it might split the team.

The outcome was 3-1 to stay in India and continue into unknown territory.

Becca, Megan, and I were all in agreement that our job was to visit and learn about and shed light on important work being done. We feared if we left early we would not have the context or the leverage to make a case for further financial support for the leprosy home and Graham's legacy.

So we agreed to venture into Jagdalpur not knowing what might await us.

What I have not explained yet is something I have never really come to grips with. It is an additional reason our lives were in danger.

It is possible our presence in Baripada was the catalyst for the murder of Graham Staines.

On our last day in Baripada, Graham drove the four of us to two different Santali villages in the rural jungles far outside of the city. Around halfway between Baripada and the first village, we came upon a large roundabout that also functioned, on that day at least, as a kind of market. I can't say if the market existed every day, but on that particular day there were many people there, most likely between 200 and 300. Vendors sat behind tables selling food. There were women standing above blankets spread out on the ground with all sorts of goods for sale. Small groups of men standing around talking. No other cars anywhere in sight. When we drove into and around the circle, every eye in the market was on us.

Walking through the first village was a surreal experience. Graham told us that aside from his family, we were the only Westerners most of the villagers had ever seen. I have searched my notes, and I couldn't find the names of the villages. But like Manoharpur village, neither had electricity or phones. The children looked at us like we were freaks—especially Bob and me. He and I are both 6-foot-4. I have blue eyes. I wore pants as opposed to a lungi or sarong. I must have appeared to be some sort of pale, fleshy alien. Young boys and girls approached us like we were ghosts, but they were not afraid. They touched the hair on my forearms and talked to me in a language that seemed of another time. Graham would translate questions and answers.

Where are you from?

Do you play cricket?

What do you think of our village?

Can I see your hand?

Can you catch a bird?

Being there reminded me of the first time I visited one of the villages in Hopi. I had been invited to a ceremony at Moenkopi in Arizona. In both cases, I wasn't sure I was supposed to be there. And yet, in each instance, it was as if invisible forces had arranged for things to transpire just as they had.

When we left that village, we had to drive back through the roundabout/market, since the villages were not connected to each other by road. Again, we passed by dozens and dozens of people. We wondered then what they wondered about us. The second village is harder to remember in detail. I could not tell you what we did. I do know that we did not stay as long; we had to get back to town. Our train left that night at 11 P.M. So as the evening came on, we set out, and for a third time that day went back through the roundabout. And as the Jeep circled, every head turned as though tied to our vehicle by

sightless thread willing us into the dusty distance.

Graham to me outside the train station:

I would be grateful if you could send me a copy of the poem you read.

As part of our time in India, we were required to do a public presentation of our lives in Texas. Often, it turned into a huge community event. Somehow, every presentation ended with me reading a poem I wrote when we were in Delhi.

I will, I replied. But you have to send me one of your translations.

He laughed.

You won't be able to read the translation.

Right.

I have been thinking about a line in your poem that I want to ask you about, but I would like to read the whole thing.

It would be my pleasure.

Thank you. And I hope that will not be our only exchange. I hope we can correspond, if that would be agreeable to you.

Of course.

I did not know what to expect, he said, when I heard a group of Americans from Texas would be visiting our city and our home. But I am very happy to have met you.

Look, I said, stumbling for the right words. You, what you are doing, you are, I have to say, a kind of hero to me.

I did not expect to say this. I had never said anything like that to anyone. Not my father, not even my grandfather.

Oh, come now, he said, blushing. That is a great kind thing to say to someone, but I am just doing what I am supposed to be doing.

I never saw Graham again. We never corresponded. I never sent the poem that Graham never read.

That night on the train I have crazy dreams about visiting villages I

110 have not been invited to. When I wake the next day, we are in Rourkela, less than a hundred miles from Manoharpur. From Rourkela we travel to Korba, from Korba to Bilaspur, from Bilaspur to Raipur, staying in each city two or three days. Everywhere we go, we talk about the amazing leprosy home in Baripada. The talented Dr. Das; the gracious Graham Staines.

While we are moving from city to city, a man named Dara Singh is secretly gathering a small group of trusted men to help him take an important step toward returning India to its Hindu roots. Singh, a prominent figure in the Bajrang Dal, the youth wing of the VHP, hears of a white missionary converting members of tribal communities to Christianity. Singh knows what he has to do. He can't risk any more conversions. He has to cleanse the country of the missionary before he and anyone else like him can do any more damage. He will save India from the missionary converter. He will kill Graham Staines.



The Mayurbhanj Leprosy Home. Left to right: An elderly patient cured of leprosy, Tim Staines, Megan, Graham Staines, Phillip Staines, Bob, Becca, me. The man in the brown shirt to the right of the man in the hat is Dr. Das. The two girls in front of Phillip and Becca had been cured of leprosy and lived at the home. I believe Gladys took this photo. It is, as far as anyone knows, the last photo of Graham, Tim, and Phillip alive.

1 According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, at the time of the murders, there were "no more than 200 missionaries left in the country." There also appeared to be no missionary activity in and around Baripada, except for the Staines'. There was no evidence Graham was doing any kind of conversion work; neither was there evidence of any new missionary activity in and around Baripada. There is also no documentation or witness testimony that Singh had been plotting to murder Graham. By all accounts, it was a quickly devised plan.

So what clicked in Singh's mind? What scared him? What was the threat? What was the tipping point? And, more precisely, why Graham Staines and why then? What changed?

Us.

Our arrival.

Our visit.

We were what changed.

Is it merely a coincidence that Graham and the boys were murdered less than two weeks after he was seen driving four white Americans into tribal areas?

He had driven into those areas for years. Decades.

When I think about what we must have looked like in Graham's Jeep on that long day at the tribal villages, I shiver.

I see our white faces. Our glasses. I see us through the windows of Graham's famous '60s-era Willys Jeep. I see a missionary, rumored to be secretly converting tribal people to Christianity, driving four people who look just like him to and from incredibly remote tribal areas. I can put two and two together. I see he is expanding his reach. I see him bringing in backup. I see the troops, the ground forces swelling.

Look at the photo of us at the leprosy home. Look at us in our ridiculous blue blazers and denim shirts. Look at the strangeness of that scene.

You can imagine the conversations: What if these four are only the advance team? What if, because of dwindling numbers, the Christians are sending in reinforcements? Look who Graham and Gladys have brought in for their crusade—a whole team.

The day we heard about the murders, we met with several Rotarians to figure out what our course of action might be. I overheard one of the Rotarians talking in somewhat hushed tones to another man about the trip Graham took us on to the tribal areas, wondering if that had been a bad idea. Ever since then, I have feared that our presence played a role in the murders. Were we what pushed Singh to act?

There is no evidence, as far as we know, that Singh mentioned seeing four Westerners in rural Odisha converting tribals. In fact, he may not have even known we existed. And that is my great hope. On the other hand, he didn't talk very specifically about the case. In fact, he denied leading the mob that carried out the killings, though he was identified by various witnesses as the ringleader. According to Human Rights Watch, Singh's followers claim he urged them to "go and assault the Christian missionaries who have come to Manoharpur, as they are indulging in conversion of innocent tribals into Christianity and spoiling our religion and culture."

Does that exonerate us?

Or, does that implicate us. Are we the missionaries he refers to? Were we both cause and target?

Another thing I have never been clear about is whether Rotary International or the local Rotary clubs believed we may have incited the killings. If so, it explains why they thought we could be in particular danger. What if Singh was waiting for us in Jagdalpur? What if we had been marked not merely as Westerners but as missionaries?

There is an even more bizarre theory that we were intentionally

used as pawns in an elaborate game to justify killing Graham.

According to the official 1999 report by the Wadhwa Commission, headed by Supreme Court Justice D.P. Wadhwa, Dr. Das—the man Bob and I stayed with—suspected Graham was involved in sketchy activities. The report states, "Dr. Binod Das, the honorary Doctor in the leprosy home however felt that he [Staines] was secretive about his going for the jungle camp at Manoharpur and as the honorary superintendent of the Leprosy Home, he maintained all accounts himself. Dr. Das also says that Staines had a deep hatred for other religions and would not eat during the religious functions of other religions."

Dr. Das never expressed such reservations to Bob or me, and I also did not find Graham secretive about his jungle camps, even the upcoming one to Manoharpur. When I first read the report, I was stunned. Was Das secretly suspicious of Staines? Did he somehow arrange our trips to the tribal areas as "proof" that Graham was bringing in more missionaries to do more conversions? The entire saga is itself a roundabout of mystery and bafflement. I keep circling and circling and circling, but I never arrive anywhere except absence, deferral, obfuscation.

For twenty years, I have tried to write about the murders. But I've never been able to do so in a way commensurate with the totality of events. However, something clicked in me two years ago as I screened *The Least of These*, a bizarre film about Graham and the murders. It was released in the United States in January 2019 to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the killings and to call attention to Graham's life and his death. Featuring Stephen Baldwin as Graham, the film was largely ignored in America though praised in India.

The Least of These relies on the widespread rumor that Graham used leprosy as a kind of smoke screen, a sleight-of-hand in order to convert tribal Santalis to Christianity. In the '90s all over India, there was a strong pro-Hindu/anti-Christian sentiment, and some believed

114 that Staines was using his popularity and his access to medicine and trades to do a bait-and-switch: you convert to Christianity, I'll cure you of leprosy. The film plays up the local suspicion that Graham is heavy into forced or paid conversions, and it invents false characters to advance a subplot about a newspaper editor who believes Graham is secretly paying tribals to convert. This last part was the biggest disappointment of the film. Not only does it provide no new evidence as to why the Staines were killed, the writers and director invent an entirely fictional plotline involving a journalist looking to scoop a story as a motivation for the murders. According to the film, a reporter, totally by accident, incites local extremists to murder Graham and his sons while giving a speech. The plotline is simplistic beyond articulation. In real life, there was no journalist. The entire premise is preposterous.

The one detail from *The Least of These* that I have been unable to forget is the moment where the boys and Graham are burned in the Jeep. Astonishingly, the film shows restraint, cutting away before showing anything as gruesome as the *India Today* photo, and yet I do not ever remember a film scene affecting me the way that particular moment did. I was deeply saddened, of course, burdened, but also nauseated. The action playing out on the screen, overlaid with my twenty-year-old memory of hearing the news, made me want to vomit. Of course, I imagined me in the back of that Jeep with my two sons. The fear of Philip and Tim. Graham's terror. The sheer horror and guilt and regret he must have been experiencing, all at once, in those last seconds. How do you hold your sons while they burn? How do you comfort them? Do I wish they had been stabbed before being burned? How does one answer such a question?

If I'm honest, I went to see *The Least of These* hoping the film would explain the murders in a way that exculpated our group and me. But—again, if I'm honest—I came away from the movie feeling worse

than when I went in. The movie lacked any convincing mechanism that would justify the incitement to murder a man and his two young sons. According to the film, the audience is to believe that a triple homicide rests solely on the extemporaneous ravings of a desperate (and nonexistent) journalist. However, I'm not sure any movie can fully illuminate why Graham and the boys were murdered at that moment.

Ultimately, even after the film, even after re-immersing myself in the various reports and stories, I have not acquired any sense of closure about the killings. But I'm sure neither have Esther nor Gladys. For her part, Gladys continued Graham's work for a few years after his death but returned to Australia in 2004. That same year, *Christianity Today* claimed she was "the best-known Christian in India after Mother Theresa." If so, she had eclipsed her late husband in this regard. I wonder what she thought about the film. She is played by Shari Rigby, who lacks her gravitas. Bob was in touch with Gladys at least once after the murders. As far as I know, she never blamed their deaths on us, though even if she did, I'm certain she wouldn't say. In the film, she forgives the make-believe journalist for his unintentional role in the death of the three males closest to her. Perhaps she secretly did the same for us.

After seeing the film, Megan and I exchanged emails. In one she wrote, "I'm still haunted by whether or not our presence was a catalyst." I do not know if I am wrecked or relieved by our mutual unknowing. All I know is that our hauntings are shared.

Sometimes, in the dark hours of the night, when I can't sleep, I get out of bed and sneak in to look at my sons. The older one, Gavin, is about the same age as Phillip. The younger one, Henry, about the same as Tim. Henry and Tim look a little alike. They are fair, cute, unable to be reined in.

And now I imagine them on fire. I can hear them saying my name.

116 They scream for me to help them. I cannot help them. And I think of Graham, the guilt he must have felt in those final searing moments. And I think about that village. And I think about Dara Singh. And I think about God. And I have no idea what to believe. ☞<

THE REJECTED LIGHT

SHURI KIDO

TRANSLATED BY TOMOYUKI ENDO & FORREST GANDER

Essentially, the beginnings take place
 in the midst of “fire”
 like the crystal clear “Ode to Joy.”
 The sky goes on forever,
 but a mystery doesn’t always look like a mystery,
 so people try to pin their mysteries to the sky,
 “Why are clouds white,”
 “Why is the sky blue?”
 On the ranges of mountains scored with grooves from a receding sea,
 the descendants of marine forms lurk,
 they cry to the clouds and howl at the sky,
 their voices, caroming between the mountain’s steep scarps,
 sound like a “yearning” for some unreachable place.
 The light lets “colors” exist,
 but those colors don’t exist physically
 so much as they exist psychologically.
 Or are they some kind of “indecision,”
 something like “a nascent feeling” never to be filled out?
 The white light from “the sun”
 slaps colors against “The Earth.”
 But light has no color
 since color isn’t an attribute of anything
 but only the visible wavelength reflected from a thing.
 Accordingly, the wavelengths people see
 are those rejected by things.
 So, color: “a rejected tatter of light.”

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 Dean Rader has published widely in the fields of poetry, American Indigenous studies, and visual culture. His debut collection of poems, *Works & Days*, won the 2010 T. S. Eliot Poetry Prize, and he recently completed a book of poems that enter into conversation with the work of Cy Twombly (forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press in 2022). His interview with artist Jordan Kantor, “On the Shelf/On the Wall” appeared in Issue 115.