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THE GOLD LIST 2017



THE WORLD'S MOST EXCEPTIONAL HOTELS AND CLASSIC DESTINATIONS

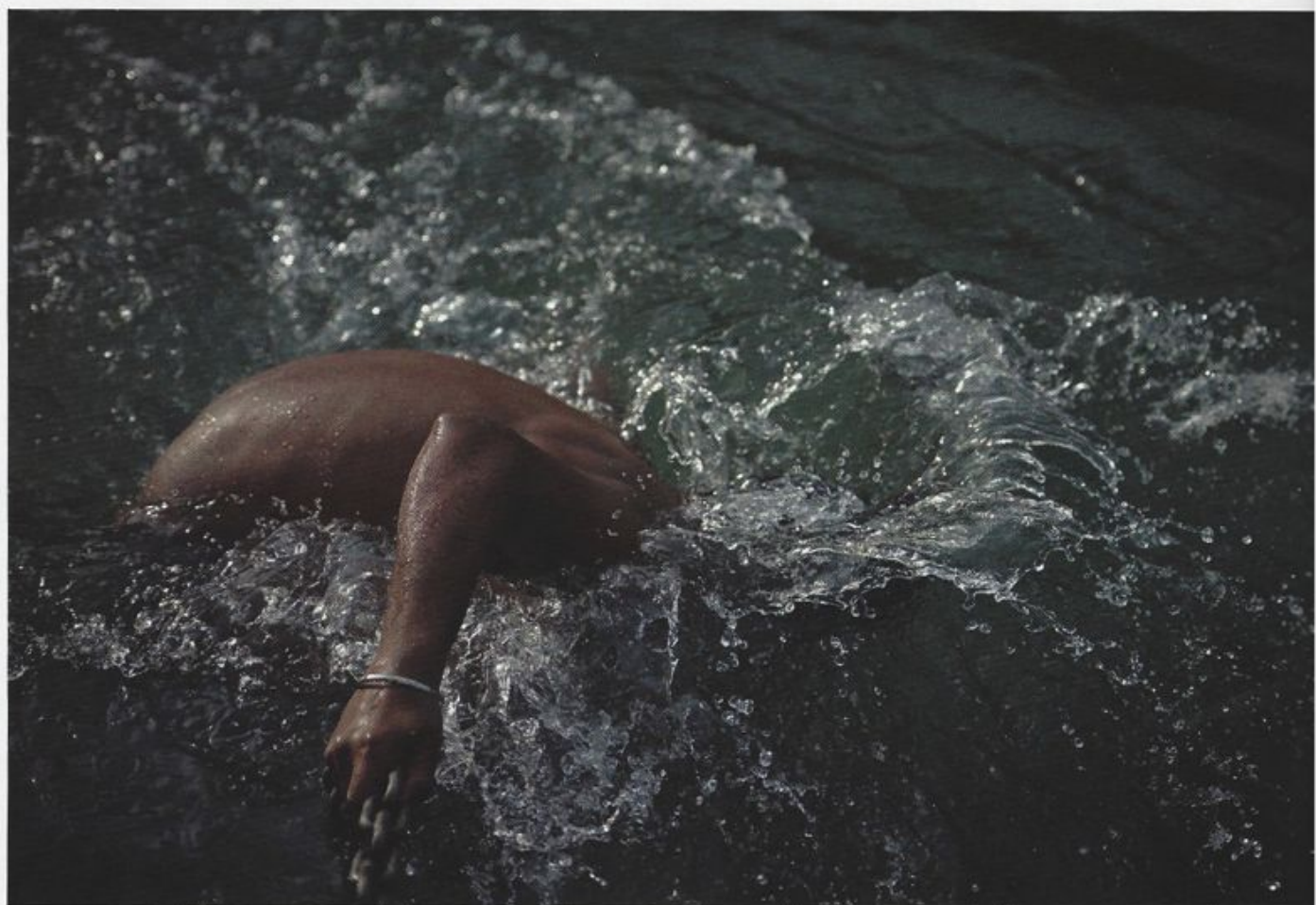


A high-angle, wide shot of a massive crowd of people, likely pilgrims, gathered on a riverbank. They are dressed in traditional orange and saffron robes, creating a sea of warm colors. The scene is hazy, suggesting a misty or smoky atmosphere. The crowd is dense and extends far into the background, filling most of the frame. A concrete or stone ledge is visible in the lower right foreground, partially obscuring the view of the people below.

HEAVENLY CREATURES

ON THE BANKS OF THE GANGES IS A HOLY PLACE HINDUS SEE AS A GATEWAY BETWEEN THIS WORLD AND THE NEXT. IT'S THE SITE OF THE GREATEST HUMAN GATHERINGS ON EARTH, AS MILLIONS OF PILGRIMS WASH AWAY THEIR SINS AND HOLY MEN VOW TO FREE THEIR SOULS

WORDS BY STANLEY STEWART. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALISTAIR TAYLOR-YOUNG



IN HARIDWAR THERE WERE TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE: those who wanted something and those who didn't. Anyone could see that the people who didn't want anything seemed to be having a good time, while those who wanted stuff were all aflutter. They had the air of stressed bankers faced with a black hole of several billions, an impending enquiry, and a talkative mistress.

Haridwar is one of India's four great *tirthas*, or crossing points between this world and the next, between what is and what might be, between your life and your hopes. It is also one of the settings for the Kumbh Mela, the spectacular Hindu religious festival held every 12 years, and reputed to be the largest human gathering on the planet. The last major Kumbh Mela, in 2013 at Allahabad (like Haridwar, a crossing point), attracted 120 million pilgrims, apparently somewhat short of expectations.

Unsure I could face the loo queues, I had opted for a sort of Kumbh Lite, held every three years in Haridwar, on the moonless night of Shiva. It pulls in only a million or so, barely loose change in the world of Indian crowds. I was staying in a tented camp, the Laskhmi Niwas, pitched in the grounds of the Nagar Kutir ashram on the fringes of the city, away from the crush. My fellow campers were a jolly piratical gang of sadhus, India's ubiquitous holy men.

Sadhus are the original dropouts. They had given it all up – homes, jobs, the chance of a freshly ironed shirt – to wander the highways and byways of India in search of enlightenment and a square meal. They travelled light with a cloth bag, a walking stick, a few dental issues. They had come here from their retreats high in the Himalayas to bathe in the Ganges.

Down on the ghats, the stepped riverside embankments in the centre of town, a few hundred thousand pilgrims were struggling to get changed beneath bath towels. Stepping gingerly on the wet stones, they approached the holy river: stringy men stripped to baggy white boxers, naked children sleek as otters, fleshy women in wet saris, frail old folk whose underwear looked like it might be swept away in the current.

There was a carnival atmosphere about these ablutions, some strange cross between Blackpool on a bank holiday weekend and Lourdes on Good Friday. Music blared, priests prayed, dogs barked, loudspeakers crackled, cows pooped, children wailed, pilgrims held their arms aloft in supplication, itinerant salesmen worked the crowds selling hand-rolled cigarettes, balloons, towels, and shampoo while the pilgrims lowered themselves into the water, holding hands, squealing anxieties, ducking beneath the viscous surface.

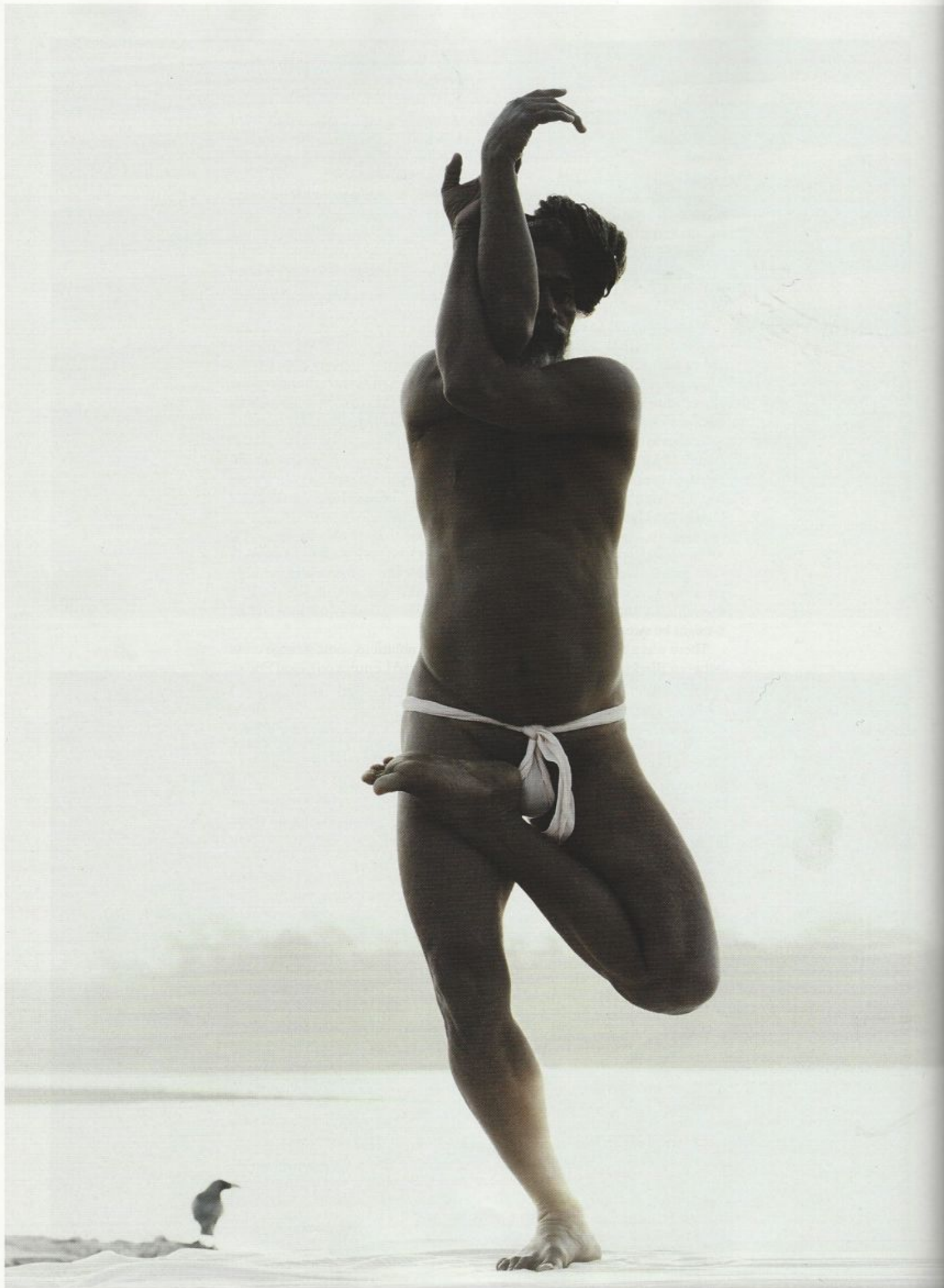
A blubbery young man at my elbow was keen on a photograph. 'Could you?' he asked. Waist-deep in the river, he turned to face his smartphone, smiling and waving as if it was a holiday snap. Skipping back up the steps, he was trembling with excitement. 'I want to wash away my sins,' he said. He didn't go into details.

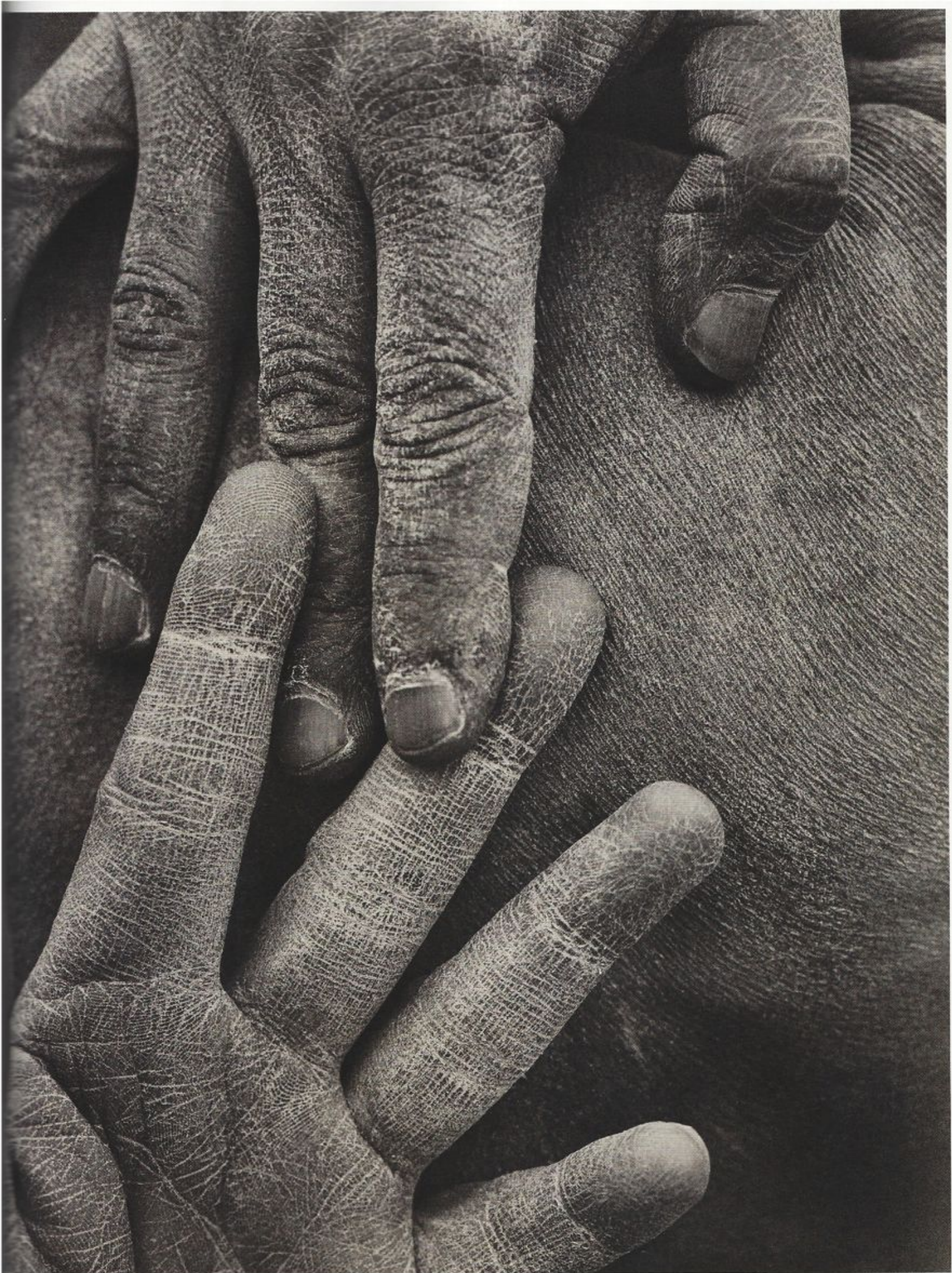
Further along the ghats, pilgrims were decorating their *kavads* with plastic flowers and plastic teddy bears. An open wooden framework, three or four feet long, and carried across the shoulders like a yoke, the *kavads* were used to transport jugs of Ganges water home, invariably on foot: barefoot for the seriously devout, shod for the backsliders. It was destined to bless friends, family, houses, crops, babies, new cars, business propositions, lovers, weddings, and whatever else seemed to be in need of a holy watering.

Everyone wanted the gods on their side, everyone desired divine intervention in an indifferent world – a fresh start, a second chance. Everyone wanted to better their life chances, to have a bit of a heavenly leg-up with the age-old issues of finding and keeping a mate, a decent job, a run of good fortune. Everyone, that is, except the sadhus. Indifferent to fate, aloof from the fevered pilgrims, they sat beneath banyan trees sipping tea and smoking cigarettes.

Leaving the riverbanks, I plunged into the back alleys of Haridwar where I was borne along by a rising tide of freshly laundered pilgrims, past smoking food stalls and pyramids of spices, past loud hawkers and brightly lit shops. The currents eddied for a moment at an intersection where a young man was stirring a vast pot of steaming pilau and three old gentlemen were bent

Opposite, bathing in the Ganges River at Har Ki Pauri ghat in Haridwar. Previous pages, sadhus gather for their evening meal at Geeta Mandir ashram in the ancient city





over treadle sewing machines that had been the latest innovation when Queen Victoria was still grappling with Albert's English.

A cow parted the stream of people as effectively as a royal litter, then another tide of pilgrims carried me sideways along an alley before depositing me in a quiet yard on the riverbank. I had arrived at the cremation ghats where white-clad figures were gathered around wooden pyres on which the remains of recently deceased relations and their desires were going up in flames.

To one side of the burning ghats, sitting cross-legged on the floor of a small office, was a bespectacled grim reaper, an elderly fellow, the recorder of deaths. He gestured for me to sit on the carpet beside him, then ordered tea. He had spent a lifetime here keeping a kind of parish record. Long, horizontal ledgers were piled high around the dusty room. He lifted one down and showed me the names crowded together on the unfolding pages. They stretched back decades to the time of his father and his grandfather.

Open on his lap was the current volume. With a long pen, he carefully entered the name of the latest arrival, whose burning odour hung all around. Then he closed the ledger and shrugged.

'Their revels now are ended,' he said. 'All are melted into air, into thin air.' He smiled at my surprise. 'Prospero, *The Tempest*, Act Four.'

Outside in the yard dung-spattered cows gazed dolefully at passers-by. The souls of the deceased must cross the River Vaitarani to the realm of Yama, the Hindu god of death. The cows, it is believed, help them. The dead hang onto their tails to get across the celestial river to the next world.

AFTER A DAY IN TOWN, among the heaving crowds of pilgrims so focused on self-cleansing and self-advancement, I was happy to get back to the peace of the ashram and my friends, the sadhus. The guardians of the faith, the vanguard of the gods, they perched on the world as lightly as birds.

There were a dozen or so sadhus staying in the ashram. They all had beards that would have impressed Methusaleh, and long, matted hair embroidered with shells and coloured thread. Their foreheads were smeared with bright tikka paste signalling their allegiance to Shiva, and on their skinny torsos was a confusion of beads known as Shiva's tears. I thought of them as Old Testament prophets who had gone rogue; Moses, perhaps, after a life-changing acid trip with a couple of flaky girls, wearing nothing but sandals and flowers. They thought of themselves as being free. They were also friendly, thoughtful, and charming. You couldn't hope for better room mates.

I say room mates but really I was too attached to the pleasures of this world to be considered part of the gang. I hadn't renounced everything and taken up a life of early-morning meditation and smiling. I was a traveller, not a devotee.

The Lakshmi Niwas camp was in a walled compound on the banks of the Ganges; Lakshmi, the camp owner, is a follower of the ashram's guru. Laid with colourful *dhurri* rugs, the tents were furnished in a colonial style with travelling chests and mahogany writing tables, fine bed linen, a shower and a flush loo. There were electric fans, drivers, chefs, guides and porters, and also laundry service. In the evening, after a sumptuous vegetarian dinner in a beautiful mess tent, I sat out on my porch in a planter's chair smoking a cigar and watching the evening fade across the Ganges while the sadhus chanted around the banyan tree.

I usually dropped in on them post-chanting in their *durna*, a sort of ashram living room where they sat cross-legged round the sacred fire like an extended family seated at a domestic hearth for a bit of companionable drug-taking. Along the walls, strings of lights hung between images of Shiva, pictures of gurus and a useful calendar from Sanjeev Cement Company Ltd.

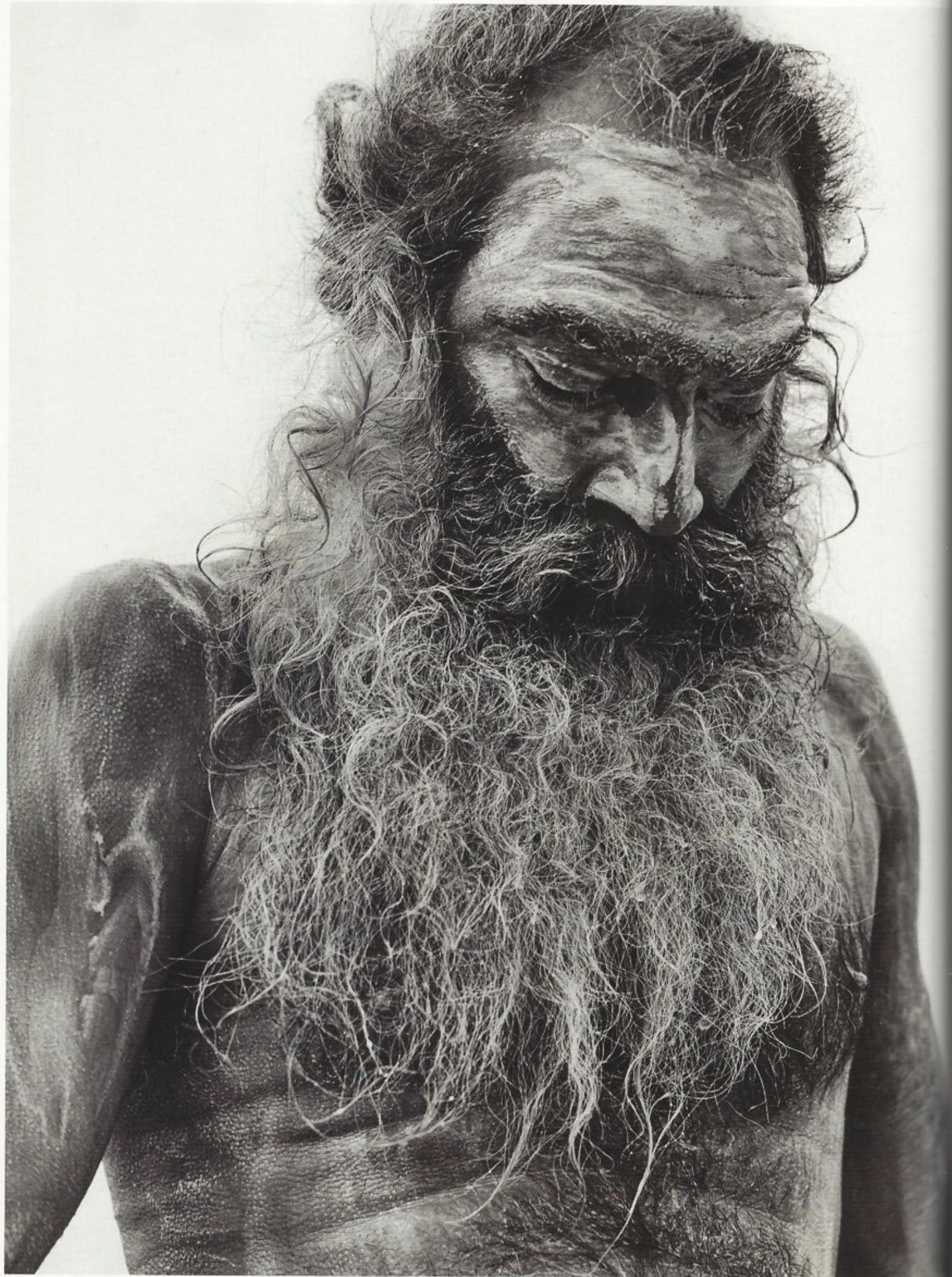
The fire, which was never allowed to go out, was tended by the sadhu I knew only as the Fireman. Smeared with ash, he was naked but for several marigolds in his hair. Sadly his navel-length beard did not preserve his modesty; his willy looked like a shy forest creature peeking out from a tangle of vines. Nakedness – sky-clad is their term – is one of the final stages of a sadhu's

Opposite, from top: the evening meal at Geeta Mandir ashram; a figure on the streets of Haridwar. *Previous pages, from left:* sadhu Rome Baba practising morning yoga on the banks of the Ganges; a sadhu joins his hands in a yoga posture









journey, naturism with a spiritual bent, a sign he has thrown off the conventions of the world along with his trousers. I got used to it, though I had to close my eyes when the Fireman was at the crease in our afternoon cricket games.

The sadhus were a surprising lot. Among their number was a former lawyer, a former teacher, a former IT salesman, and, of course, a Swedish former model. The latter was the original hippy chick whose personal geography included Chelsea in the 1960s, Kathmandu in the 1970s and Ibiza in the 1980s. When her fellow groovers retired to suburbia, Uma had gravitated to India and a contemplative life of chanting, smoking weed and tending a garden, the only foreigner and the only woman in the ashram.

The Fireman's right-hand man, a diminutive fellow with a voice that would make Barry White sound like a soprano, did the honours, lighting up a chillum, a hashish pipe the size of a Cuban cigar. As it was handed round like a sacrament, a contemplative stillness descended on the group, interrupted only occasionally by giggles.

'Detachment from attachments,' the Fireman said, stroking his beard as if it were a pet collie. 'Moksha,' he whispered, his voice now a wheeze. 'Liberation.'

THE FOLLOWING MORNING FOUND ME on a small island midstream in the Ganges with Rome Baba. Silver light spilled across the surface of the river. The blue peaks in the distance were the foothills of the Himalayas.

Rome Baba and I had become boon companions. He had acquired his nickname because he had spent several years in Italy, and we bonded over our shared ability to speak very bad Italian. The language suited him. In Hindi, he sounded rather serious. In Italian, he became flamboyant and flirtatious.

His Italian former friends would have approved of his dress sense: Rome Baba was a bit of fashionista in the sadhu world. Today his bare torso was laced with long necklaces and strings of beads. His waist-length hair, pulled into an elaborate topknot, was completely covered with flowers – yellow marigolds, white carnations, pale strings of jasmine – so he appeared to be wearing the kind of spectacular Easter bonnet favoured by rural folk on the American prairies in the 1930s. He looked like a celestial prince, a member of a heavenly delegation. I suddenly had an image of him at the Gates of Paradise, winking mischievously at me, beckoning me inside while plucking a flower from his hair and offering it to Parvati, Shiva's wife.

Rome Baba was also an impressive yogi. In his mid-50s, he had the flexibility of a 14-year-old Romanian gymnast; so far I had managed to dodge his early-morning yoga classes although others spoke of them with awe. This morning on the river island he was tying himself into elaborate knots. One moment his ankles were behind his head. The next his head was behind his behind. All this without the slightest threat to the Easter bonnet. Should the wind change and he become stuck, I worried I'd never be able to unpick him.

As we made our way back across the side channels, Rome Baba was telling me the story of his life. It threatened to be interminable, beginning as it did with learning to walk. He stopped in midstream as he reached a crucial moment during his stay in Rome. There was a girl, a betrayal, a broken heart.

'Paula took my face in her hands,' he said. 'She told me she was leaving for Copenhagen.' The cold river surged about our thighs. 'I cried. Tears and tears and tears. Five days. That is when I understood the pain of attachment. So I met a beautiful woman in Piazza di Spagna. We made love in the Villa Borghese and I surrendered to the loss of Paula.'

He grinned and pulled me up, dripping like a wet dog, onto the bank.

'We must accept our fate, and not waste our energies desiring what we do not have. We must learn to live this moment,' Rome Baba said. 'Because it is the only moment we have.'

Greaves Travel (greavesindia.com; +44 20 7487 9111) offers bespoke itineraries to India. A trip to Haridwar starts from £2,200 per person, including five nights full board at Lakshmi Niwas camp, BA flights, tours and daily activities. The camp runs during special Hindu festivals. Contact Greaves for the latest operating information.

Opposite, sadhu Mahant Jaswant Giri in an *asana*, or yoga posture, during his morning practice. Previous pages, a candyfloss seller at the festival