

# Upon a Passing

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

I come home and the streets are lined with looming silver wheels that gleam in the early evening light. They stand in silent rows on both sides of the street, following it up one slope of the hill I live on and down the other. There must be hundreds of them, each in its turn reflecting the hard glaring sweeps of the passing cars' headlights. They rustle in the light breeze, whispering in the thickening dark.

When I left for work this morning, there were trucks and yellow-helmeted workmen in the street. I could not be sure of their exact intent, but their mere presence gave me cause to fear the demise of yet another swath of the green that so insulates my apartment from the crush of the growing city. In a few months, I thought, a new angular concrete "mansion" would crouch next door where the bamboo and irises and goldenrod now grow. But on my return this evening, I saw it would not be so.

A neighbor of mine, the resident of a low-slung house just down the road, has passed on. Tonight the first installment of a series of funeral ceremonies will take place in this house. The silver-white circles along the roadside are *hanawa* (lit., "flower circles"), a traditional sign of respect in mourning.

My neighbor, to whom I would occasionally nod as I passed him jogging on the street, was a man of some stature, it seems. A large local company bears his name, a common one that I never imagined connecting him with the signs and advertisements for his company. But now I know. On some *hanawa* are written his name, on others, the name of his company. Each of those also bears the name of its donor. Brushed in large characters. Gandhi wrote, "My life is my message"; of what significance are these words after the end of life? I gnaw on this thought and have no answer. I walk the length of the street, reading.

A car now drives slowly by, the occupants leaning forward, straining to make out the names on the hundreds of shining circles. I watch them for a while, reflecting on how many *hanawa* I might rate when I make my own exit. The same thought must surely be running through the mind of each passerby, calculating the impact of something keenly personal but eminently unknowable.

I turn, and go inside and make a cup of tea, intently forgetting the *hanawa*, in so doing engraving thoughts of "after this, what?" in a deep corner of my soul.

The next morning opens to a sky brushed lightly with cloud. Outside, the bamboo sways to the rhythm of the day's first breaths. The silver-white circles, with their foil-and-paper flowers and ink-brushed tributes are gone like a dream upon a premature awakening.

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