

In 100 Years

An Anthology of Climate Fiction from Nepal

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2022
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Supported by Quixote's Cove

Cover background art by Anusha Thapa

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Foreword

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Evan Tims

I'd been fascinated by climate fiction from a young age, largely because of an intense curiosity to know what might happen to me during my lifetime. I'm part of a generation that will, uniquely in the last few centuries, live in a world with fewer resources than our parents. There's no shortage of evidence pointing towards a negative future. Institutions like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) create numerous possible timelines based on emissions scenarios. In other words: how bad things will get according to the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere. Proliferating from those estimates, which tend to skew conservative, are journalistic accounts of what truly may be a terrifying reality. Sea level rise, massive droughts, deadly heat waves, extinctions and diseases haunt the dreams of my generation's future. Meanwhile, we're expected to continue living life as usual—to go to university, get jobs, and pursue our passions, as though we're not all sitting on the cliché-but-apt train hurtling towards a cliff.

Growing up in Maine, a tiny and rural state dependent upon natural resources, I felt an overwhelming sense of precariousness from an early age. My parents, their parents, and their parents' parents had lived in a landscape that hardly changed. But my hometown was directly on the water. If sea levels rose as much as they could by the end of this century, how much of it would be left? Would the forests I grew up wandering still stand, or would they be consumed by massive firestorms under extreme drought and heat stress? I wanted to know—I had to know. And so I found every book of climate fiction I could—which wasn't many—and read them.

Reading can be a way of seeing—of viewing possible worlds, parallel universes. It's even a bit like time traveling. But most of the science fiction I found growing up was more concerned with fantastical technologies and space travel than the dire conditions of our planet. Which was

fine; it's wonderful for our literature to speculate about interplanetary civilizations and AI, and it can reflect and inspire new ideas about technology and society. But there is an undeniable gap in our writing of the future that perhaps reflects a gap in our consciousness. If literature is a form of sight, we don't seem to want to look at climate change very much.

But look at it, we must. We must especially look if we're in a position to do something about it. Not everyone has equal access to the systems that generate vast sums of CO₂. Not everyone can vote or take part in the governments of the nations emitting the most carbon. Yet climate policies set in the U.S. will impact every corner in the world. And in the cruelest and most obvious irony, the regions most at risk are the ones that have been exploited by the economies most responsible. The West, in large part, has gotten rich off South Asia by making it pay for the true environmental and social cost of our production—both through colonization and the continued industrial exploitation of the region. And now, South Asia may well be the most climate-vulnerable place on Earth, facing unimaginably hot temperatures, widespread droughts and sea level rise.

In the U.S., our climate fiction looks more or less like what would happen if all of the contemporary impacts of environmental degradation in South Asia happened to us. Our speculations of the future involve often unconscious reflections of what has already occurred here—vast cities blanketed by unbreathable pollution, heat and superstorms that kill tens of thousands, floods and landslides that level towns and villages. If we're going to overcome our cultural blindness to the future of the climate crisis, we may want to start by foregrounding the voices of those already bearing the brunt.

I first arrived in Nepal in October of 2021 as a Henry J. Luce Scholar. Like most researchers, academics and fellows, I came with a preconceived goal. Mine was to understand Nepal's dominant narratives of climate change, and how those narratives impact the present. My knowledge of Nepal was filtered largely through the lens of others who had arrived with notions in mind and written books and articles about them. In other words, I was foolishly unprepared, bringing nothing more than the unearned confidence of every other young person who moves abroad.

Rightly and deservedly, my first four months or so were full of failure. Coming from the U.S., where science fiction and speculation are woven tightly into our most popular media, I expected to have an easy enough time charting the imaginaries of the future. I thought everyone would have clear ideas of what the future might hold. Instead, I mostly found stories of uncertainty. Each individual narrative I encountered referenced the unclear possibilities of geopolitics and governance, with climate change as an unknown wildcard. When I asked people for their perspectives on Nepal in ten, twenty and even fifty years, they mostly chuckled and pointed out that they could hardly predict the next six months. However, I arrived at a critical moment: *Ningwasum*, the Adivasi futurism film by Subhash Thebe Limbu, was released that winter. Changes to landscapes and ecology emerged as a major theme during the Kathmandu Triennale 77, an international art festival. *The Weight of Water*, Neelima Vallangi and DeeJ Philips' 2021 documentary about climate impacts in Nepal, was screened throughout the year. Conceptualizations of Nepal's future in light of climate change were being reflected through a growing variety of cultural formats. As I spoke with friends from various communities and parts of the Valley, I felt that there was a strong and growing interest in climate fiction as well.

I had never taught a workshop before. I had also barely published any of my own writing. But I wanted to create a space where members of my generation and I could work collaboratively to imagine the future, albeit from completely different perspectives. I had no idea what to expect, of course—I prepared exercises and set a schedule, and barely slept the night before our first class. Two minutes into the session, I abandoned my original plans; simply because I didn't need them. The writers who joined were bursting with passionate ideas about the climate crisis, what it meant for them and how they might start writing about it. My job quickly became not that of a teacher but a moderator, occasionally asking questions and structuring our time, but otherwise allowing the space to grow organically. They were quick to note the failures of Western cli-fi, and came up with a wealth of ideas for their own stories in every class. They also turned the workshop into a remarkable thing: a community.

Everyone took it upon themselves to show me something of Nepal, not just through their writing but by opening up about their lives, challenges, and favorite places. Shrijan took me to

Pashupatinath temple, where we walked among the oldest sites in Kathmandu and stood on the banks of the Bagmati. Aastha brought me to Kirtipur, showing me the lurid carvings on the temples and secretive trails near Tribhuvan University. Shranup showed me a *Bhatti*, a traditional sort of bar with infinite *chhang*, a type of rice wine. Deepali described hometown and the lush forests she missed while living in Kathmandu. Prajjwal taught me a great deal about economics and foreign currency reserves. P.S. proved how busy it is to be a law student. Sajeet and Shranup revealed a bit about what it's like to be a journalist here, and Anupa shared what it means to be departing Nepal for an education abroad.

To mark the end of our workshop, almost all of us made it to Godawari, a richly forested corner of the Kathmandu Valley. After exploring the botanical gardens, we climbed the marble *danda*, a defunct marble mine. The desiccated remains of cranes were patiently dissolving into rust. Great scars left behind by the slicing of stone, already crumbling, looked almost like natural features. Decades ago, the place may have been choked with dust and the smell of fumes as men and their machines worked to harvest material from the skin of the mountains. Now, it's a peaceful environment where Kathmandu-ites spend their weekends smoking, picnicking with elaborate lunches and enjoying the misty hills.

Sites like the marble *danda* are a testament to the flexibility of life. In many ways, so is Kathmandu. Layered with thousands of years of human history, the city is full of ecosystems. A veritable civilization of street dogs overlays that of the humans. Rats, crows, countless insects, owls and bats make their homes in cubby holes and on rooftops. Weeds take root in every spot of open earth, and endless creatures find rich hunting grounds in the piles of trash left by the city's struggling waste management system. This is not to look upon the city with naïve eyes. The managerial, social and environmental issues that plague the valley are devastating for humans and animals alike. It is rather to suggest that, as we in the West raise our walls and tremble at the thought of our cities being subject to the costs of our own profits, we ought maybe instead to look at Kathmandu.

Instead of seeing South Asia as a future climate catastrophe, we should look to it for new ideas and strategies for existing in a climate-changed world. And above all else, we should

prioritize in our discourse the perspectives of those living in climate-changed communities. The dominant global hegemony has caused the climate crisis. We simply cannot solve it without making space for the imaginations prevalent in communities already navigating the changing world.

Preface

...

One thing that I've realized is that this time, right now, is the most crucial time for all of us. If we change our actions, let's say even a bit, we will be writing a better future for upcoming generations. A couple of weeks ago, I went to my village's river where we used to swim when we were kids. During this particular time of the year, it would be difficult to cross. But now, it's become so small—even smaller than some of the *nalis* of Kathmandu. With those dried up rivers, our memories had dried too.

But let's hope there will not be days when we have to describe to our children what rivers were and what they looked like?" We cannot be late now. Working at the "last hour" as I did with my writings, shouldn't be an option while we are heading towards climate change. Let's hope our future generations won't feel the need to be Martians. In fact, let's hope they can be peaceful citizens of planet Earth.

—Anupa Khanal

If I was alone while attempting to write climate fiction, the experience might have been simply depressing, but surrounded by fellow writers who share the same passion for literature, the experience was depressing yet also hopeful. We may be shouting into the void but we aren't alone while doing so. A collective voice may alter the course of predicted history, and each voice raises the intensity. After all, humans have the power to destroy as much as create. We wrote stories where we condemn human greed and appeal to our humanity. There may still be hope in the future and if humans survive, so will our stories. Hopefully, our stories will survive till a time when the calamity of climate change seems like a far-off dream.

—Shranup Tandukar

In Nepal, we don't really get to see climate and the future as a genre being discussed in popular literary discourses. We mostly see social realities as the main theme, so being aware of the fact that we were probably the only ones discussing and writing creative pieces on futuristic climate fiction set in Nepal was extremely daunting and exciting. Maybe it would have been easier if we were imagining the future of Climate Change in western countries rather than in Nepal. I had never imagined the things that I had mentioned in my stories in the context of Nepal. I know it is shocking, but I guess it has to do with all the books that I have read that cater to the West. In the global mainstream media, we don't hear much about Nepal regarding the environment and climate change. Even here in Nepal air pollution in Kathmandu is the only issue discussed widely in the media.

–Deepali Shrestha

The discussions on climate fiction, dystopian works, and the anxiety brought about by climate issues pushed me to think further about how I can contribute to the scenario with my pen. I shall cherish the experience with one major takeaway, i.e. South Asia needs more writers on climate fiction and futurism so that our stories can be presented, as it is, in front of the world.

–Aastha Ghimire

I had to fight and cry about the workshop with my parents because the time '5 P.M each Friday' seemed shady to them. I even took my mother with me on the first day, hoping no one would steal my kidneys there. Besides, I had also googled my facilitator, Evan Tims, expecting him to be a typical 'old white man with a beard,' but he turned out to be someone who looked like he was in his thirties by his pictures. Later, it was further hysterical when I saw him for the first time, and he appeared even younger.

I had not seen the urgency of climate change to this degree in my life before the workshop. Throughout the last months, while most of my law school classmates feared the heap of assignments and waited for weekends, I feared how everything would be flooded if the

glaciers melt, and my worst thought was, “Holy cow, I can’t even swim. How am I gonna survive if that happens while I’m still alive?” I actually became so climate conscious that I pictured myself living in a house surrounded by lots of trees in the future instead of high-rise buildings and a jam-packed chaotic city life. The complete opposite of where our future is headed.

In a rather unexpected manner, the ‘one and half-hours’ each Friday had become a routine which I wasn’t ready to slip from my fingers. Now, as I sit inside mostly empty classrooms of my law school with lunch and earplugs, scribbling into my notebook as always, still living my dreams as a writer, I’m no longer lonely. All these awe-inspiring writing adventures in the climate fiction genre, and my author friends, give me company.

– P.S. Luitel

The workshop only reaffirmed my notion that we are a generation that has found itself caught in the middle of a vital period of human transition. And whether we like it or not, these are the cards we’ve been dealt with, and we need to make the best of what we’ve received.

But more so than just developing as a storyteller, the workshop has also been a great source of hope and optimism. While not all the tales we wove were happy ones, the experience has enlisted faith in me that there are others who have felt the same urgency as I have, and storytellers who will allow me to take a glimpse into their fears and hopes for our shared future.

–Sajeet Rajbhandari

Climate was an issue that was limited to stats and foreign protest slogans for me. While I always perceived it as an immediate call to action, I was failing to fully visualize it. Fiction came as a tool for me to identify the chaos and its impact on individual lives. I could feel the thirst of a struggling footpath vendor standing in the blazing sun of Kalanki. I could feel the shivers of the cold, heavy rains in a beggar's leaky tent. I could cry with the Qatari migrant worker whose family was washed away by glacier melts.

Fiction helped me dive into individual struggles all while navigating their lives under bigger entities that caused their situations. Fiction was a free world; I could use anything to show what was real. The workshop helped me dive into new territories not only of the world, but also within my mind. Imagination is magic and we need it to make sense of the delusions that blind us.

–Shrijan Pandey

Working on my fiction pieces, I realized the intensity of the climate crisis. The destiny of human civilization as a whole appears gloomy if we as a generation fail to make rational decisions on government as well as personal levels. Thus, I appeal to each one of you reading this to make changes on your level in our fight against the climate crisis. Let's do our part until it's too late!

–Prajjwal Dhungana

where does it end

...

Shranup Tandukar

*The greed, greed, greed
as ancient as time, as infinite as space
made the sun, the stars, the moon bow down;
flattened the hills, melted the mountains, swallowed the sea*

*a snake upon its own tail
now none remain to heed*

*the prophecies of the blasphemous mouth
the land has been returned
to the chaos/order it once was born from
no one no thing no where remains now*

*where is the Self when none remain
where is the Phoenix when the ashes blow away
where is the miracle of Lazarus when the tomb stays shut
where is the legacy when gods
die with men*

Kimbu

...

Sajeet M. Rajbhandari

You don't often see the sunrise these days. The rising sun is usually hidden by a thick brown wall of clouds. Not remotely as pretty as the polaroids my brother shows me. He'd taken the pictures years ago — back when we were still allowed cameras and such — from the nearby Shivapuri hill. Unlike in my brother's pictures, the sunrise and sunsets are little more than a pale haze now. Nowadays, you can barely make out the sun until it's high noon.

You can still feel its heat on your skin though. Heat is all you can really feel these days.

Baba constantly tells my Mamu how nice it would be if they could go get some *kulfis* to beat the heat, just like they used to when they were my age. I've never had a *Kulfi* but I imagine it must taste like a cool breeze; at least that's what Baba always tells me it tasted like.

It feels cooler today than it has been for the past month. It was still pretty hot, but at least I didn't wake up already drenched in sweat.

Sometimes even the water is too hot to drink. With no way for us to refrigerate or cool our food or ourselves, we just have to make do with whatever temperature the day has decided on.

Frankly, the only way we'd be able to cool off better was if we could get one of those fancy air conditioning units that the houses in Kathmandu have. But I've been told that those things cost an arm and a leg. That's two appendages more than what our household runs on every month. Us folks living in the city outskirts don't have the luxury to afford such things for our homes.

Refrigeration and air conditioning are the least of our problems. I can probably list a gazillion other things that us outskirts dwellers put up with. We can't even be picky about what we choose to eat.

Ever since the agro-crisis of 2057, the government started to strictly ration the amount of food its citizens can consume. The more fortunate in the city still had a few luxuries that they can savor, but the rest of us just have to make do with the bland pasty oatmeal blend that comes to the ration post each week.

The government sanctioned radio sets in our homes tell us that the blend has a mix of all the necessary vitamins and supplements our bodies need. It sure doesn't taste like that. They weigh us at the ration post, and give us the blend accordingly. There's supposed to be a scientific metric that the government uses that tells you how much food you need to survive. Not that it really matters. With so little to go around, everyone pretty much weighs the same these days.

If your family runs out of the provided blend early, you'll have to wait till Monday to get it again. That's when they bring the new batch from the city.

Sometimes, if we're running low on food, Baba eats a little less so that I don't go hungry. He doesn't tell me this, he just says that he doesn't want any more of the bland goopy meal. But I can tell that he doesn't want me to be hungry. On more fortunate days, my brother brings home a hare that he managed to catch from the Shivapuri forests.

We have to be careful with these catches though. Most animals you find around the forest are said to be protected, and hunters are often punished with steep fines if caught. The Magar family down the *tole* had to sell their old scooter when they got caught cooking a wild pigeon, and even that didn't cover the entirety of the penalty. But it'd be a lie if I told you cooked meat doesn't taste heavenly.

I don't mind the food as much as the adults though. Those who lived through the big shift in the city tend to be more sensitive about smaller things like food and heat. After all, for kids like me, this is all we've ever known.

Baba on the other hand constantly talks about how he craves actual food. Sometimes, he'll tell us stories of food from back when he was younger. His tales will be about crunchy instant noodles that would turn into spicy soupy delicacies when you cook them in hot water. He'll also tell us about momos, little nuggets of mincemeat kept inside balls of dough and cooked. But most of all, father tells us about candy. Small sugary black and orange balls that he and his friends would buy from neighborhood shops with money they had begged their parents for.

His stories about candy always intrigued me. He'd describe them as sweet and sugary. I don't think I've ever had anything that's like that.

Around two in the afternoon, Ravi comes by. He's the only other kid my age in our *tole*. He's also the only friend I have.

Ravi arrives at our door all giggly and squeamish. He's buzzing with excitement.

"Let's go, let's go!" he says.

"Where?"

"I found a place."

Before I could even properly put on my *chappals*, Ravi takes my hand and drags me out of my house.

Soon, we've made our way past our cramped *tole* and into the old school compound that borders the forest. Back in its heyday, the school was supposed to have been one of the better schools in the valley. It was probably true, the compound was huge. However, once the city pushed away the poor to the outskirts of the valley, I guess it didn't make sense to run something like this in the middle of the slums. Today, the school is a shaggy mess, with weeds and vines covering most of the brick buildings.

Ravi navigates us towards a more forested part of the compound. The once brick path is now covered with moss, so we have to be careful not to slip and fall. Ever so often, you'll hear a bird coo, a bit unnerving since you rarely see birds around the settlements anymore.

After we manage to crawl through a few bushes, Ravi finally comes to a halt at the base of a tree. He looks at me grinning.

"A tree?" I say, mildly annoyed.

"Yes."

"I don't see what's so interesting about a single tree?"

"Look up"

I look up. It takes me a while for my eyes to focus, but I eventually manage to make up small black specks scattered across the green of the leaves.

"Ravi; What's that?"

"Kimbu"

"Kimbu?"

Ravi clammers up the skinny trunk, his feet strategically finding safe crevices in the tree. He picks a few of those black specks. Once he's managed to collect a fistful, he hops back down to where I am.

"Here, try one. It's good." Ravi says, extending a palm full of black berries towards me.

I pick one. It has a small oblong shape that's made up of smaller spheres. I give it a little sniff. Then I cautiously place it in my mouth. It doesn't taste like anything at first, but then I give it a bite. That's when it happens.

As my teeth squeeze the berry, it bursts and the juices touch my tongue. For the very first time in my life, my palate learns what sweetness feels like. I don't need to be told that this is indeed sweet, my body just seems to know.

Is this what the black and orange candies that my father always preached about? I never imagined anything could taste this good.

"Good?" Ravi asks.

"Mhmm." I'm already reaching out to grab another one.

Ravi and I spent the rest of the afternoon plucking and eating all the kimbus we could get our hands on. By the end of the day my fingertips had been stained purple.

Ravi told me that the green ones aren't ripe. I greedily ignored him and tried one. The sourness made my eyebrows wince and my eyes water. Ravi was right, the green ones aren't ripe.

Ravi and I kept going back to the mulberry tree all summer. It was our little secret garden, our little safe haven, from the putrid brown skies of Kathmandu, from the hot dry summer wind, and especially from the tasteless oatmeal goo that all of us on the outskirts call food everyday.

On some afternoons when Ravi and I would climb the tree, the sun would hit the branches just right, and Ravi's hair would look as if it was on fire.

Eventually winter came. And as the months grew cooler, the tree grew more bare. Slowly Ravi and I stopped going to the tree. But that's okay. Even if it was just for a summer, I got to feel what sweetness tasted like. For the briefest of days, the world was unable to have my life immured by its cemented rules.

My father still tells the same stories about the black and orange candies from his childhood, but this time around I imagine that they taste just like my beloved Kimbus.

11,757 kg of Poop

...

Deepali Shrestha

Grishma woke up from a deep nap, her head throbbing. She usually had a headache after coming home because of the terrible air quality in Kathmandu, but this was different. One of those naps that allures you towards its embrace then leaves you feeling worse than before. She hauled herself out of bed and looked at her face in the dirty mirror of her bathroom. Beads of sweat had formed a white pencil mustache on her upper lip, accumulating the expensive cruelty-free foundation that she had applied in the morning. Her armpits were hot and sweaty, smelling like spoiled yogurt. She undressed and looked at herself in the mirror again, naked. She felt her belly.

She checked her phone and saw seven missed calls from Ama and ten from her only best friend, who lived in the US. She had been out of contact with people who cared for her for a while. Besides the missed call notifications, there was another that was two days old. The two-day-old notification was like a mosquito biting the plump skin of her arm whenever she unlocked her phone. But she didn't squash the mosquito with her palm; she let it stay there, comfortably sucking her blood. *Self-sabotage*, she thought. This realization did nothing to alter the present situation.

A fresh vial of semen was inside a box filled with liquid nitrogen that served as an at-home-freezing-tank; the box had been sitting inside her apartment for a few days. That was the present situation. She still had around a week left before it expired. It was delivered last Wednesday, when she had just returned home from work at the university and was sipping tea that she had made with a dash of black pepper. The tips of her hands were blacker than the *marich*, stained from the painting class she'd had that morning. She'd painted a dilapidated gothic house. She was an artist and taught painting at Kathmandu University School of Arts. While she was drinking, she got a phone call from the guard *didi* of her apartment that a package

had arrived from *Independent Life*. When she heard the company's name, she forgot about the tea and dashed outside her apartment.

The advertisement for *Independent life* that she had seen a month back while browsing through articles about sperm donors zoomed slowly through her mind as she walked to the mailbox. A single sperm with a smiling cartoon head and a woman who looked like Emma Watson with a stethoscope, giving a thumbs-up beside the sperm. The sperm wriggled its tail and the woman kept winking her left eye. Outside her apartment building, a monitor beside the guard didi revealed the air quality index—hazardous. The guard didi wore a mask that helped purify the air she breathed. It was a special kind of solar energy-driven mask that the doctors had advised people who continuously stayed outdoors to wear.

She slowly retired to her apartment. The notification informing that her package had been delivered successfully vibrated the phone inside the left pocket of the shorts she was wearing. She didn't bother to give it a look and swipe.

After unboxing, she found a small guideline book and a solid box wrapped inside plastic. She wanted to call the company and tell them to quit plastic and return the delivery. But when she saw the instructions, with the wriggling, smiley sperm and the winking woman as the cover, she grew calm. She decided to not return the box and only write a complaint email later on. Unlike the advertisement, the sperm and the woman were static on the cover. They seemed dead.

“Thaw the frozen vial of sperm at room temperature for about 15-20 minutes ,” said the guideline. She gently closed the guideline book and kept it above her small fridge, mindlessly. Whenever she opened the fridge for other purposes, she intentionally avoided looking at it, let alone using it. The next day and the day after that, she pretended the box didn't exist, as well as the fact that she'd paid half her month's salary for it.

She wanted to call her mother and explain the situation to her, but she knew that her mom wouldn't understand. It was not just her mom who didn't understand, it was the whole world.

She had always been an environmentally-conscious person. At the age of 14, when she made a boyfriend for the first time, she learned about a Swedish activist named Greta Thunberg

who was only a few years older than her and had been going on school strikes, sitting outside the Swedish parliament urging the leaders for stronger action against climate change. Her boyfriend, who was the smartest guy in his class and a year older than her, once told her that her passion and drive for the environment reminded him of Greta Thunberg. When she came home she googled her name, and eventually she became her role model. It was as if Greta was ventilation, letting out her angst and letting in thoughts that gave value to her feelings; she was living vicariously through her. She was equally impressed by her boyfriend's capacity to know things, and as if being obliged to thank him for the gift of Greta Thunberg, she let him kiss her one hot summer day when they both were alone in his room.

The years went by, and she and Greta Thunberg grew up, but to be different. When she came to Kathmandu for her University, life struck a different chord. Although she did follow her creative path, her environmental passion faded into the background. Over the years, her art increasingly became the only thing that could capture the remorse she was filled with.

Greta Thunberg continued to be a ray of hope as the world became more and more susceptible to climate change. Many Greta Thunbergs emerged. She kept on living vicariously through them but didn't want to do just that; she was tormented by the desire to do so much more.

After 25 years, Grishma felt like a captive in the concrete jungle that was Kathmandu. She felt guilty whenever she turned on the air purifier inside her apartment and could sleep in the air-conditioned, cool air when underprivileged people were breathing toxic air and sleeping naked on their terraces or the streets, their bodies covered with mosquitoes.

But, more than that, she hated eye contact from young people. The progress in combating climate change was extremely bleak. The social media platforms like "Pla-net-working" and "Greengram" created by youths from climate change-affected communities were filled with angry Gen Alphas bashing Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X for the shit happening in the world.

She could avoid eye contact in other places except for the university where she worked. She even developed a trick where she focused directly on the space between the eyebrows of her students, so she didn't look as if she was avoiding them whenever they came close to talk. But that didn't really work out.

She made a handful of boyfriends, making sure that they were her age or older. Making boyfriends from a particular age group didn't ensure that she would have a healthy relationship with them. Some were scared of her anxiety about the climate and also the fact that she wasn't doing anything significant with her life, and some pretended they understood but couldn't hold that for long. A few of them loved her, but she left them without giving any reason that seemed plausible to them.

"It's not you, it's me," Grishma would say and break the hearts of her lovers.

"To be honest, it's the climate and me!" she would add.

She was now 38 and single. Most of her friends were married and had kids. By now she was sure that marriage wasn't her cup of tea, but kids were something she always secretly loved. When Kathmandu's air quality seemed a bit on the healthier side and felt just like the Kathmandu she knew of, she dreamt of having kids and teaching them how to paint. When her best friend, Shreya, announced that she was pregnant, she hated her for having a baby. But, deep down, she also envied Shreya for her happiness after having a baby who would have to live in a world that was on the verge of coming apart. How could she, who couldn't even look at babies in the eye, have kids of her own? That was what slapped her face time and again when she thought of having kids.

At first, Shreya only talked about her child with Grishma on the phone. Eventually, the sharing of photos and videos began. She played those videos on a loop. The videos encouraged a desperation to be a part of this baby-making business. Her internet digging began, and she found blogs of women just like her: some who decided to have a baby and some who didn't. She couldn't take a side at first, but the more she saw photos of Shreya's baby girl, the more she wanted it. In one of those blogs, she got to know about *Independent Life*, a website where she could meet donors all around the world. Their medical descriptions were also available, and learned that they also had an office in Gairidhara, Kathmandu where she could consult with their team if she wanted to. She didn't want any consultations, so the only thing left for her was to match with a donor, talk, and confirm by paying a handsome amount.

At first, she thought of matching with Nepali men. She gave up the idea as she didn't find any Nepali man suitable enough for her baby. She then expanded her horizons and talked with men from different nationalities. She connected well with an Australian guy who was also very passionate about climate change. After a few days, she realized that he was the perfect fit but still hesitated to confirm and pay. She had never been friends with a white man, let alone date one, so the prospect of inserting a *bideshi's* sperm inside her body and making a baby out of it seemed daunting. She finally confirmed it on a whim, and the package arrived after a week.

After seeing the missed calls from Ama and her best friend, she decided to call her mother and tell her what she was about to do. After two long rings, Ama picked up.

“Hello, Ama?”

“Grishma, where the hell were you? I was so worried!”

“Ama, I need to tell you something.”

“Did something happen? Are you okay? Why do you do this to us!”

“Ama, I am going to have a baby with the sperm of a donor.”

Silence.

“Ama, I will explain to you everything. People do this nowadays, it's normal and safe. I..”

“Dad is calling me. I'll hang up for now. Bye.”

Ama hung up and she didn't try calling her back. She thought of calling Shreya but gave up on the idea. She felt like a terrible daughter.

“I will be exposing an innocent human being to the consequences of all the shit that our generation and the generation before that has done and I'll also be a terrible mother!”

Grishma said to herself.

My child will hate me, she thought.

She had read an article in the University's library that the average life expectancy for men is about 76 years and for women around 81 years. A man living to age 76 would produce about 11,030 kg of poop over his lifetime, and a woman living to age 81 would produce about 11,757 kg. A lifetime of a woman's poop weighs about as much as three adult male hippos. Humans make around 60,000 kilos of trash in a lifetime. This was what she would leave behind on the planet after dying and what her life meant, she thought, as she had been of no use to the welfare of her family let alone the dying planet, and on top of that, she wanted to have a baby. She wanted to slap herself and wake up.

Neither did she slap herself, nor did she wake up from her already woken state. She went to her kitchen, still undressed, and took the guideline. She also took the box and placed it on the kitchen table and stared at it, mindlessly, for sometime. She was well aware of what she was doing and she wasn't. She carefully took out the tube and the syringe.

Outside the window, the sky was overcast and the setting sun a deep orange. She could see guard *didi* and the AQI index. The color of the monitor was red indicating the hazardous air quality. Very few people were outside their homes even though it was a Saturday.

"I am a pathetic mess without any option," she said.

Duty

...

Anupa Khanal

As soon as you enter the floor, Ramila - our robot receptionist- will greet you and scan you from foot to toe. She is quite swift in checking whether you have entered your record at the entrance or not.

*Then, a little walk down the aisle will lead you to **Room no.103**. Welcome to my home. While the world is speeding up, I've been bedridden in this small hospital room for the past six months, doing nothing except filling my head with memories of the past.*

Today, my AI psychologist, Miss Sophiya, provided me with a virtual reality therapy session using my past videos. All my distant memories were right before my eyes. Especially the day when I got recruited as a traffic police officer.

“Aama, baba, your daughter has become traffic police.” I ran towards the kitchen to share the news with them.

“Chhori, is it really true?” baba asked with a bit of a confused tone.

“Yes, baba. Now, we can repay all of our debts.”

They both hugged me tightly. I could see the happiness in their eyes. Our family had never been so happy in the past few years. It was a golden day for us.

Aama even distributed motichur laddu and jeri to all of my relatives that day.

The initial duty days were harsh and grueling. I would return home without an ounce

of energy left in my body. Facing the polluted roads of Kathmandu and the reckless drivers made my task challenging. The air purifiers couldn't filter out the air completely due to the extreme pollution. Breathing specks of dust and getting splashed with muddy water from puddles were all part of my daily routine. However, we humans can adapt to any kind of environment.

When we stopped the riders from breaking the traffic rules, we got nothing but verbal assaults. Gen-Zs would even post an incomplete video with “#weneednewrules, #weneednewofficers” slogans to make it sound like we treated them the wrong way. And boom, we were viral. In simple words, people didn't see us as other people, and being a woman gave them another reason to disobey me. However, all this brought a major transformation in my life. I became louder, stricter, and more confident.

These fifteen years of my duty on the road taught me lessons I could have never learned otherwise. The job helped me pay off the loans of my father and buy a new home for my mother. However, no one can repay the things it has taken from me.

After feeling a sore throat for more than a week, I went to a clinic to get a check-up. They gave me cough syrup. I took that for three days, but nothing changed. My throat got worse. Then I learned I had developed asthma from my years on the road. Every morning began with doses of medicine. My health continued to weaken. I had to put on a nebulizer every week. Those fifteen years' worth of Kathmandu's dust had taken its toll.

I continued my work in the hope that I could give a better life to my children. But even that was too much to ask for. One Tuesday night, I was heading home after finishing my shift. Suddenly, a loud noise caught my attention. Turning back, I saw a red car speeding in the middle of the road. It didn't have a number plate. I signaled and warned it to stop. Instead, it veered directly toward me. The last thing I remember is the flash of the headlights. One week later, when I regained consciousness in the hospital bed, I found out it was an automated driverless car.

“You have a visitor.”

The notification from my TV interrupts my memory session. On the screen, I saw a

young lady with a small boy waiting at the door. Only when she faced the camera did I see her face. She was Pratima, one of my closest friends. I met her during my duty days in Kathmandu. I instantly pressed the remote to open the door. As soon as she entered the room, her eyes widened with shock. First, she saw the heavy plaster on my head and me struggling to look up at her. She never got over the sight of seeing me in bed, one leg missing, the other covered in a thick cast, my face covered with an oxygen mask. As soon as she entered the room, she saw me on the bed with my one leg completely plastered and oxygen supplied.

“What a pleasant surprise, Pratima!” I greeted her while taking off my mask.

She hugged me and took out a small plastic bag. Inside there was a small badge and a letter. The badge was my “inspector” badge which I had received on the first day of my job. And the letter was from the senior police constable.

While reading the letter, I often glanced at Pratima. Her eyes were already watery. And how could I control mine? She didn’t speak a word and I couldn’t open my mouth. We cried together.

All of us were fired from our job because the traffic management office introduced an AI traffic system to the Kathmandu roads.

7866 km²

...

Aastha Ghimire

“How about we go to Asia next year? The preparation to climb a peak could take about six months, we should plan the requirements,” Rachel said.

Rachel Moore was one adventurous person. Born and raised in Colorado, she felt mountains calling her to their laps every time she saw the Maroon Bells. She wanted to conquer picturesque landscapes instead of just admiring them from a distance. After writing her name in many snowcapped lands, she now wanted to move her fingers on the snow of Godwin Austen Mountain. She wanted to feel the thrill of windy air with her best friend by her side. She assumed he would agree to the trip without a second thought. Well, why wouldn't he? They grew up together as neighbors; cycling along Colorado's wide roads as children, going on hikes as teenagers, and canyoning as adults. Their love for nature, mountains in particular, maintained their bond. Having climbed eleven peaks together in the USA by 23, they were destined to explore many corners of the world. But this time she was taken aback by his response. The man with mountaineering in his blood didn't agree to climb the world's highest summit.

Kunsang was an immigrant. His parents came to the states in 2040 A.D., five years before he was born. The migration was the result of catastrophes in Nepal. His ancestors, inhabitants of Solukhumbu, were prominent businesspeople in tourism. Generations of investment in hotels, transportation, and tourism activities got them established as the wealthiest Sherpa family in the village. Kunsang would have been following the same path had it not been for four glacial outbursts in July 2040. The calamity washed away moraines, hillsides, and hopes of Nepal.

“*Sabai sakiyo*” Terrified screaming was heard all over the Khumbu region that day. People in the lower basins began to panic after learning that the South Col ablation had caused a flood outburst. The number of casualties in base camps hit the international media. *Gumbas* and lodges looked like cookies dissolved in milk tea. The depletion of the snowpack at South Col was the first signal to evacuate people in Solukhumbu, but only the ones who could charter private helicopters could move out of the region as quickly as possible. Everybody else perished.

“Pack the minimum, we don’t have much time,” Tshering, Kunsang’s father, told his wife. They first tried to save the business before resigning themselves to the fact that they could only save their family. “When will we come back to see our home?” they spoke with their eyes when they watched their lands from the sky. The sound of the helicopter faded as the loud yelp and silent uncertainty echoed on the rocks of mountains.

They made it to the capital city by leaving behind everything they possessed. “We’re alive, we’ll start a new life,” he said, trying to comfort his wife even though he himself couldn’t see a clear future in front of him.

While people who could afford to were still trying to escape the place, three more glacier floods destroyed three districts in Eastern Nepal. Solukhumbu, Sankhuwasabha, and Okhaldhunga were rendered unsuitable for human settlement. Deglaciation in Imja Tsho, Khumbu, and Ambulapcha led to unprecedented ramifications. Sagarmatha National Park and Barun National Park were to be found only in pictures from then on. Ruined were also hydropower projects, airports, and roads—but they could be built again. How were the national parks to be re-established? How were humans, plants, and animals to be brought back from the corpse dumping sites? The avalanches and floods that followed for the next three weeks carried away any possible form of human civilization in all three districts. The south-east was affected too with floods, but civilization there wasn’t yet in the question of danger. National and international funds were used to help flood victims in southern lands; there was no one left alive in the north to receive aid.

“We’re doomed. Tourism will never revive back home. We’ve lost everything.” These thoughts almost killed Kunsang’s mother. With the help of friends abroad, they moved to Colorado and began using their mountaineering skills to sustain a livelihood. Gradually they found hope to stay alive and, after their first baby boy, they agreed to leave the past behind for a better future. Though they missed Nepal, they knew better than to reminisce of respected and comfortable days.

“What’s wrong with you? We planned to climb the tallest of the tallest peaks. Oh, are you scared?” Rachel said in slight annoyance.

“Listen, I will climb every peak you say except K2,” he replied.

“Why? At least let me know why.”

“It isn’t even worth it. The tallest peak in the world is only 7000 meters. Why bother?”

“So now you want to climb the non-existent mountains above 7000 meters?” A tone of sarcasm was evident in her voice.

“You know there used to be mountains above 8000 meters....dad talks of them.” His voice dropped to a whisper at last.

The look on his face was new to Rachel. She had never seen him both sad and angry at the same time. His eyes always gleamed at the idea of reaching heights. So why is there such sorrow in him now?

7000 meters wasn’t enough for him as the highest point on Earth. He grew up seeing photos of his father at the top of Mount Everest. He wanted to climb Mount Everest and other *himals* above 8000 meters. This desire clashed with a disappointing reality. *Reality, almost like a horror movie being premiered every now and then.* The directors of these shows were anthropogenic craftsmanship, and investors were the countries with the highest carbon and GHGs emissions. In 2068 A.D., the reality was that Mount Everest couldn’t be climbed because it was no more a snow-capped summit. It was a half-barren pinnacle used as a military camp by China.

When Solukhumbu, Sankhuwasabha, and Okhaldhunga turned into a lake of 7866 km² in 2040, the government of Nepal failed to manage the possible disasters in the near future. Fear was prominent among people nearby. A few politicians resigning and leaving the country fueled anxiety and chaos. The socio-economic instability brought about by the climate problem compelled Nepalese to let China annex the three districts. Since China agreed to build a dam in a way that the remaining districts would be saved, there were no protests. And that was how 1,47,181 km² of Nepal became 1,39,315 km². And that was how Sagarmatha, once the pride of Nepal, now belonged to China.

Kunsang hadn't visited Nepal but hearing these stories from his parents he felt weirdly upset. He was aware of the fact that Nepal contributed less to global warming yet suffered many impacts, in fact, more than the countries which were primarily responsible for climate change. This thought made him somewhat resentful towards powerful nations, despite singing the national anthem of one. To avoid living as a bitter immigrant, he rarely gave importance to his origins. His parents' birthplace didn't even exist on the world map with the same name. Avoidance was working well for him until Rachel suggested the idea of K2.

“Hey, sorry for earlier. I thought it over and I want to climb K2. Let's do it!!!!” he texted her later that night.

“Who knows what place will vanish tomorrow? I'm willing to put aside my feelings and explore the available peaks. Maybe I could visit Nepal after the trip to Pakistan. I heard spiritual tourism is the new buzzword in Nepal,” he journaled before going to bed. That night, Kunsang dreamt that he climbed Mount Everest in Solukhumbu.

Pani Manche

...

Prajjwal Dhungana

Water is god. A decade has passed without a single drop from heaven. Or hell, I do not know. For the sky is never blue or white or bright like it had been when I was a kid. It was a different epoch then, the time before World War III. Tranquil mornings hopping in the warble of birds, silent breeze whistling across the leaves of gigantic trees, and bees leaping from one flower to another. Yellow Van Gogh sunflowers under the cerulean blanket of life. If you were lucky enough, you would witness a rainbow- a symphony of seven different colors from violet to red in the canvas of nature coming together in a bow, so hypnotic that you would lose yourself in eternity.

Today, all we have is sand. We live in sand and perish in it. Cactus, a thorny, fleshy plant is what has kept us alive. Once you remove all the spines and cut through it, you have abundant food to keep you well and hydrated for a day or two. Yet the Bourgeois have started buying them with all their treasures and hoarding for the future. Cactuses are no longer an accessible commodity for people like us.

A year ago, Lama dai—one of my neighbors—started eating sand itself, for he could not afford any food and neither could conquer his hunger. He was okay for a fortnight until bizarre symptoms started appearing. Gastric pain and bleeding, constipation followed by hardening of the stomach, which slowly extended to the other parts of the body. Within days he grew dry, rough, and slack. His limbs started giving up, trickling slowly back to the sand like snowflakes from the mountains. The last time I met him, only his head had remained. The sight was gloomy

and terrifying at the same time, I fled the place in a few seconds. I decided to choose death instead of swallowing sand when I run out of food.

“What else can I consume then?” someone inside me murmured in desperation. “Fellow humans!” another suggested from the left side of my heart. “What choice do I have anyway rather than killing people for food?” yet another asserted, this time from the right side. “Is it ethical? Is it moral? Can I do it? etc..” many voices inside me erupted like bubbles in the boiling milk. For the first time in my existence, I felt like I was not one but many. I passed my entire life thinking I knew myself the most. There I was, the most ignorant and unreal person I have ever met.

If cannibalism is unethical, war is too. Nepal was the most neutral country the world had ever known. We never tormented anyone and did not have any intentions to. Combating our own mess of poverty, corruption and underdevelopment kept us occupied. We had no nuclear weapons to bombard others with, nor could we defend ourselves.

The planet was always in a crisis and so were the lives of billions inhabiting it. The tussle between Russia and Ukraine almost half a century ago grew into a menace engulfing the entirety of human civilization at once. As Albert Einstein once said, “I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.”, Today wars happen with nothing but sand. Dozens of Tsar bombs, 3300 times more powerful than the one that dropped on Hiroshima in the second world war, were deployed by Russia. The blasts took no longer than 3 milliseconds to change everything into sand and only sand. The few million people who were able to survive the catastrophe were forced to live on dust.

Life without water is almost impossible. Upper-class individuals have managed to get bottled water in the black market. They also have enough cactuses to fulfill their water needs. The majority of people have distilled urine. It tasted salty in the beginning, but everyone got used to it with time.

People worship the thing that they do not possess. This is why everyone is unhappy in the world. We take things, however important they are, for granted once we have them in abundance. In absence of this, we become dissatisfied and desperate and start longing for the same object we once disregarded. This is why different religions have different gods. How gods changed

throughout history tells a lot about how human necessities evolved over time. Not by coincidence, people glorified nuclear weapons as almighty before the third world war.

Today, water is the only religion on Earth. People believe that once they have enough water, things will return back to normal. Everyone prays to water infinitely in their minds and actions. Not a single endeavor precludes the glory of water and soul it can bring.

It has been a week since I have had any food or water. Embarking every single day on a forage for a stem or two of succulents and mere drops of water is what defines my life. I wonder if Rautes survived like this in the woods before. I wonder if the world is really all aboutif regression– cycles repeating, again and again till infinity.

I am returning bare handed from today's scavenge along the dusty roads of Satdobato. My neighbor's house is vacant. As I head towards my ramshackle house, I hear a commotion, “Pani Manche, Pani Manche!” Everything feels like a dream driven by some universal will where I am merely a cast and nothing more. With our arms turned upwards, we parade to the place where Pani Manche is landing in his ship of ice. The gruesome, dark clouds break apart with thunderbolts and storms as we stare at the scene. The clouds swirl, the storm enrages and lightning intensifies as Pani Manche races towards the Earth.

Some people think of him to be Thor, the son of Odin while some believe him to be Kalki - the tenth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. There are people who reckon him to be Lord Indra – the god of rain while some hail him as Christ. Whatever they say, he must be the God for whom we were waiting for so long. Our meditations have sufficed, our vows have been fulfilled, and our destiny is secured. Our suffering has finally paid off.

After a decade of drought, drops of water fall from the sky. One of the first beads which fall on my upper lip is more intimate than any kiss I’ve had before. I embrace it, pulling the drop inside my mouth. When it touches the upper part of my tongue, I experience ephemeral sweetness carrying me to my childhood, when I had quenched my thirst in spring water. I feel content after years of longing for a drop of God.

Everybody is twirling in the rain with their face upward. All have become children for the first time. Collecting handfuls of rainwater in their palms, they are sipping it and pouring it onto

one another. Spring is back after decades. With the first drops of water in the sand, plantlets have started appearing. The sky is crystal clear with clouds so white that it feels like I have time-traveled to my early days. Life has returned to me and the blue planet.

Lost in my own rejoice, I forget to track Pani Manche. Some say that he landed on the muddy soil and dissolved himself into a bright pink lotus, 2*2 meters large. A few never saw Pani Manche and called the rest of us insane, while a handful of old people think he went back to where he came from. I do not know what happened to him, but he is the one who saved me and my home. He is God. Pani Manche is God for me.

Badal ko Sahar

...

Shrijan Pandey

“It’s that time of the year again.” Agni stares at the blazing sun through the clouds.

Summer has begun, though you can barely tell the difference. It’s noon. Agni shades her eyes with her palm on her forehead, resembling a salute. The sun’s excruciating rays start to burn her neck and she sweats the last few drops of water from her body. But Agni doesn’t move. Today is a special day.

Agni stares as people start falling from the clouds, waving with the wind, and safely land on the ground with their heavy tourist bags. “I hope they like my stuff.” Agni exhales a melancholic smile. This is the first time she is selling for the gracious winged people who come down to Earth to help us by generously buying our products. At least that’s what Agni’s father told her in his final hours. This year marks a new beginning for her life; she can’t wait to see how the day will unfold. “I hope it rains too. This is the only time it rains.”

Agni moves to the bazaar. It’s crowded mayhem, one of the best parts of town. The shopkeepers regularly clean the streets. This is the only area that’s clean. The streets are lined with shops filled with antiques, exquisite dresses, jewelry, high-quality fabrics, local musical instruments, and much more. The bazaar seems artificial compared to the world outside those shops. How else would the winged people come here?

Agni drags out the swimming tubes from her tent and starts blowing them up. The swimming tubes are laced with tiny stone bracelets, marked with traditional Earth designs, to give them an authentic, Earth-y vibe. She removes the legs of her jute-made tent and places them over the tubes to ensure they don’t explode from the heat. Agni can feel her blood boil

with every blow on the tube. She inhales, leaving no space in her gut, and exhales fully till her belly contracts and cramps. This isn't the easiest job, but at least she isn't one of those unlucky ones who have to work inside the mania of the groundwater plants, 20 hours a day, for two 250ml water bottles. "I heard someone dies from a heat stroke every day; what is this compared to them? I mustn't be weak." Agni continues to blow.

"How much for the duck-shaped tube?" a voice calls.

Agni looks at the tall man landing in front of her. His black, curly hair covers the edges of his bristly eyebrows; his red lips contrast with his milk-white, concrete jaw; his dress is a little baggy, but you can feel the silk in the fabric by just looking at it. Agni watches as his wings wave while he lands. He clears the dirt from his wings, which blows toward Agni's tent. Agni encounters the first flying man of the year. Agni herself is a short girl, her skin moderately burnt, her glasses tinted, and her face dry and full of pimples, but carrying a unique softness, probably because of her snubbed nose. She feels small over this mystical being. She is intrigued. He looks charming, nevertheless.

"1000 rupaiya for that one." Agni raises her index finger and looks at the tube. "This is one of my best ones, sir. It took me the longest time, 6 months, to be exact. It takes the heat pretty well."

The man walks around the tube, pinches the nose of the tube's duck head, and runs his finger over the rubber.

"1000 for this garbage!?! Don't fool me, lady. I'll take it at 500, no buts," the man exclaims as if he is shouting at her.

Agni is shaken. "Sir, I invested months on this. 500? I can barely get 2 bottles of water with that money. You know it doesn't rain here, like in your place. Many winged people bought from my father. They didn't bargain."

Agni tries to stay confident, but she isn't telling the entire truth. She remembers her father mentioning some winged people who bargained for the lowest price possible, but this

wasn't what she expected. Agni doesn't know much about these people. In fact, no one does. They mysteriously come to land from the air. No one knows where they live. The clouds? The moon? Maybe. They are the only species that can fly. The birds disappeared a long time ago. No one knows where they went but rumors have it that these flying people don't find any creatures crossing their paths in the sky. It stopped raining too. She assumes it only rains above the clouds, where they presumably stay. Why would they buy swimming tubes otherwise?

“I know you, Earth people. All scammers. Can't I have a good holiday for once!” The winged man flutters his wings.

Agni stares at the man. She knows for a fact that his shorts cost a hundred times more than this tube, no matter which world they buy them from. “I can't sell you for that. I have kids,” Agni resists.

The winged man turns red, his wings start to flutter. He goes to his pocket, takes out a small bundle of money, and throws it at Agni's face. “Here's 750, stay within your limits, lady.”

Agni is bamboozled. She can feel a fire burning inside her but she bites her lower lip to control the flame. She watches as the winged man reaches for the swimming tube. Agni stands, dismayed. This is the gracious being her father told her about. She feels helpless. She collects the money while the man wraps the tube around his torso with a rope.

Agni counts the money. “Four Hundred, Five Hundred, Five hundred Fifty.” She counts it again. “Four Hundred, Five Hundred, Five Hundred Fifty.” She couldn't be wrong. She counts it the last time.

“Sir, here's only 550,” she exclaims, still in dismay.

"Count it again!" She does.

"I can't sell this at this price. This took me 6 months to make. It's not worth 550."

“What! Don’t scam me, lady. I know how you do business here.’ He grins as he continues tying the tube to his torso.

“I won’t let you leave. You can’t do this,” Agni screams.

“Watch me.” The man tightens the rope and opens his fangs. Angi tries to run after him but the man is already off the ground.

“Please, come back!” Agni begs. The man looks at Agni and spits at her face. “All you ground people are the same. That old man before this was the same. Pigs!”

This enrages Agni. She always knew her father as a warm human being, who always believed in fairness. She knew he wouldn’t ever scam anyone, let alone think about it. Agni snaps. “Father, you were too humble. These aren’t gracious heroes. I will show him who he is.”

Agni jumps towards the winged man and grabs the nose of the tube’s head. It’s slippery but her hands are dry. She hovers around and hangs to the man’s feet.

“What are you doing? Get off me,.” the man shouts.

“I am getting my money back, you thug.”

Agni tries to hold on to his legs and reach his wings. The man starts kicking Agni’s face brutally. Her nose starts bleeding on the second kick. But Agni stays relentless. She has seen the truth about winged people. Agni reaches for the man’s wings and holds on to them.

“We will both die. Stop, you fool,” the man cries. But Agni stands still and holds on to those wings. Agni sees the man’s back. To her surprise, she finds out that there is a zipper connected to the man’s clothes. They weren’t attached to his body.

Agni thinks quickly. She slides the zipper mid-air. She isn’t scared of the fall. Nobody talks about her father’s sacrifice like that.

Agni manages to take out the wings. The wings, in mere seconds, wrap around Agni's back. She watches as the wingless man falls to the ground.

Everything happens in an instant. Agni is shocked, bewildered by the quick turn of events. The reality that she had pictured for the past 20 years of her life crumbles to pieces right in front of her. The winged man who fell down looks just like anyone from the ground. She looks at herself. It hits her. She's hovering in the air, with the wings, just like the winged man.

Are these winged people the same as us? Did they create these wings? Were they one of us? Where do they live? Can anyone fly? Reality becomes hazy.

She tries to control the wings. She can maneuver them by her will, though it takes her a few tries and lots of near-falls to get the hang of it. She waves her hands and stirs them to move in a certain direction. She once dreamed of flying in these clouds, but she had never expected it would be this messy.

Regardless, Agni now has two things with her: a pair of flying wings and a stream of never-ending questions. She knows what to do now. She has to look for answers.

Agni flaps her wings and starts moving upwards to navigate the world in the skies. The wind troubles her but she's a quick learner. Sometimes she swirls, sometimes she feels like the skies know no end; most times, she doesn't know where she is headed and why.

Far up in the sky, she sees a strange cloud. It's huge and black. These clouds had been increasing in numbers recently, but Agni didn't know there were larger ones up above. She takes a deep breath and prepares to explore this new enigma. When Agni reaches the top, her reality shatters again.

These are not clouds but cities. There are huge homes that resembled the *Old Durbars* and *Mahals*, like the ones ancient kings lived in, but with techy renovations all around. The streets are fluffy; they look like they'd feel like slippery limestones. Trees emerge from the clouds and she can hear birdsong, though she can't spot any. Agni takes a deep breath. The air feels pure and leaves a sweet, Jasmine-like aroma on every inhale. "What is happening?" Agni

constantly murmurs as she starts walking on the cloud streets.

Every sight baffles her. She sees huge houses with large swimming pools. In one of these royal houses, she sees a small tube floating in the pool. She can recognize it. Only her father could make such a craft.

She takes out a small piece of cloud from the ground and wraps it around her head. The cloud almost feels like butter as it smoothly rests on Agni's skin and acts as good camouflage. She kneels down and starts walking toward the gate. The swimming pool is fed by a running stream of water from a pipe. Agni is intrigued. Back home, people die from heat strokes while working to fetch water from the ground, and water is traded for diamonds. She wishes she could drink water from the pool till her belly explodes. She tries to go closer but an electric shock bars her entry to the gate. She screams but instantly covers her mouth to avoid any sound.

Agni stays there for a while and observes. She sees a family of four come out to their garden beside the swimming pool, and sit at their dining tables. They wait as someone less fair comes out with heavy loads of plates. She looks at the man closely. He doesn't really look like one of these cloud people. His clothes are similar to what the son in the family is wearing, but with holes around the sleeves. His face is much darker than the rest and is so skinny you can see the bones around his neck. Agni can feel that the scars on his forehead must have a deeper story. She watches as the man serves food to the family. It's a feast she has never even dreamed of before. Whole roasted turkeys, bottles of wine, plates filled with Basmati rice whose aroma quickly enchants Agni's nostrils, bowls overflowing with a range of curries — mushrooms, paneer, poached eggs — and many sweet desserts she has never seen. She slurps the saliva hanging from her lips. Her belly starts to howl, reminding her of yesterday afternoon's boiled potatoes — her last meal. However, she can sense from the faces of those people that they are somehow not satisfied. Not only does their reaction to the food seem normal, but also their angry babble at each other at the dinner tables showed dissatisfaction over the taste. "What more could you want?" Agni murmurs. She watches in dismay as they barely eat half their food and the man cleans the leftovers.

"New to this place?" a voice calls.

Agni leaps out and covers her mouth. Her heart races. However, she recognizes the accent. Only ground people speak like that.

She turns back. A woman, probably in her late 50s and wearing a jute dress, stands in front of her with a broom in her hand and a set of rusty wings on her back.

“What is this place? How are you here? What is happening?” Agni tears up.

“They call it Badal ko Sahar, Nani. Are you new here? How is the world below? I can’t remember the last time I was there. How young I was then!” the old lady smiles.

“I don’t get it. What is this world? How are you here?”

“This is where the rich stay. They built this city a few decades back. The Earth below was getting unlivable with each passing day. This scared the rich. So, they all gathered up one day and used all their resources to build this city. They took the best engineers and labor from below and constructed this world.”

“How does this work? Aren’t they superior, magical people?”

The old lady moves near Agni’s ear and starts to whisper. “Not at all, Nani, though they like to believe it. They have huge machines that suck the water out of the clouds and fill them with helium. This way, they get the water and oxygen here and leave the toxins to the world below. They also own the lands on Earth. That’s where they force the farmers to produce their food. Those on Earth have to fetch their own water, gather their own instruments, and send their own children to labor. No remorse at all. They don’t even leave a portion for the workers to eat. And in return, they pay us in nickels.”

Agni is speechless.

“And how are you here, young lady? Are they still bringing workers from the ground?” the lady inquires.

Agni stays frozen.

“No. I stole this wing. I stole this wing from a man who was stealing our lives. Why would you stay silent? How could you see your own people die?”

“I have no choice. I had the same rage as in you before, young girl. The police will get you soon. Breathe a little before you go. I am sorry, young girl.”

“The police?” Agni’s eyes open up. “What are you say-

-Intruder suspected. Wings disabling. In 3,2,1-

Agni falls from the clouds and to her death.

Rain and Sky

...

Shranup Tandukar

My mother says that I've loved the rain since I was born. The day of my birth, my mother couldn't stop my wailing until it began to rain. The rainfall became my lullaby and I drifted into a sweet sleep.

But a year after I was born, the rain—the answer to farmers' prayers and a soothing ointment to blazing days—became acid. Instead of rattling like a machine gun on tin ceilings, rainfall started sounding like water being poured on hot oil. Just as violent, just as chaotic. Sirens would blare in the beginning, cautioning everyone under the open sky to seek immediate shelter. Soon, it became apparent that staying outdoors for any length of time was impossible when rain could break out at any second.

Those unfortunate enough to experience the rain would have their skin corroded off and develop severe burns. The most unfortunate, who couldn't seek shelter from the rain, would be burned alive by water.

Soon, everyone started to stay indoors. Doors that led into an open sky became a distant memory. The ground was plated with a thick layer of gold. In the past, gold had aesthetic value, now it was the most effective protection against rain. Humans turned into ants; we built elaborate tunnels that connected everything. Corporate buildings were indicated with intricate arches.

Individual houses were forgotten and everybody started living in underground apartment buildings. Of course, some are more luxurious than others.

No one ever dares to go outside nowadays. Not like there are any paths. All the hatches that lead to the outside world are closed shut, the keys stored safely by remaining governments. No one aspires to go outside anyways. There is only death awaiting on the surface. If not the rain then the air will kill you, if not the air then the heat; if not the heat then the occasional floods.

When I was growing up, my mother would tell me tales how she used to run around without a care under the azure sky among trees, tall and green. She would tell me how she would climb trees with the agility of a chimpanzee and snatch fruits—mangoes, guavas, and apples. When she told me these stories, I used to look at her with wonder in my eyes and disbelief in my brain. *How could you have gone outside when inside is all that exists*, I used to wonder.

“*Maa*, how big is the sky?” I used to ask every time she would finish her story.

Everytime she would say the same thing.

“It’s as big as you can imagine and a bit more,” she would reply.

Trying to imagine something as big as I could and even a bit more, I would struggle with the paradox and fall asleep in a deep slumber every night.

Some days I have dreamless nights, like floating upon a fishless sea or drifting into a starless abyss. On these nights, my body becomes stiff as a rock. Then, as a nightly ritual, *Maa* glides noiselessly into my room to turn off my bedside lamp. I imagine her noticing my rigid frame and exhaling a heavy sigh. Pulling the blanket up to my chin, she plants a tender kiss on my forehead. In the morning after these nights, two glasses of milk wait for me instead of one for breakfast. Every time I have two glasses of milk in the morning, my heart splinters and I realise *Maa* spent last night not sleeping, but worrying about me.

But on luckier days, dreams come easier. I dream of places that I have never seen before—vast fields of sapphire-green blades of grass with big, fluffy cows grazing languidly; terror-inducing cliffs surrounded by a deafening noise of waves crashing one after another; hamlets nestled upon hillsides where I can pick out human shapes on terraced hills like cascading steps. Some days, it rains and the raindrops feel ice cold against my skin. I taste the water and it tastes familiar, like a childhood memory lost to time.

But most days, there are no clouds in the azure sky. I spend hours in the dream world gazing into the sky, breathing in the surrounding sights.

In the morning, I wake up with my brain in a fog. For some panic-stricken moments, I forget where I am. I look around my room with the toys scattered everywhere, books lying half open on the floor, and a giant screen on the ceiling.

After I awaken, the screen comes to life. Some days, the screen shows a cloudy virtual sky but most of the time, the screen shows a sunny day, devoid of any specks or clouds.

I can never stare into this sky for more than a second. Though it looks exactly like how my dream sky looks, its icy-blue depths evading any limits, I always feel in the depths of my heart that this isn't real. Though my eyes can't detect the millions and millions of microscopic pixels that imitate reality onto my ceiling, my heart knows that there aren't limitless possibilities in the endlessness above.

Beneath this artificial azure-dome, I am bound by glass.

Kalki

...

P.S. Luitel

*I'm here. On a white horse named **Devadatta** with my parrot **Sukha** (immortal after overhearing the Divine **Amar Katha**, who is all knowing: past, present, and future). Born with **Dalit** blood at odds with human predictions; I'm a **Brahmin** knight by noble action and advanced knowledge of **Vedas, Purans, Upanishads**, combating the theory of "nobility" by birth created by humans. Blazing like a comet with a fiery sword named **Nandaka**, I'm here.*

*Hindu **Vedas** and **Purans** call me **Pramiti, Rudra**;*

*Christians call me **Jesus** who has returned;*

*Muslims and Jews call me **Masihah, Messiah**;*

*Buddhists call me **Buddha Maitreya, Rudra Cakrin**;*

*Sheikhs call me **Sage Matsyanra**;*

*Zoroastrianist call me **Shah Bahram** and the list goes on.*

*Many have claimed to be me, like **Agastya** and **Vijaya Kumar Naidu** did, but they can't be me.*

*Only I am me—I am **Kalki**.*

*I bring justice, I bring doom to evil. I've waited long enough for the fourth age of the world, **Kaliyug** to end. Finally it's time. I've been to every planet where humans could possibly*

*hide, and ended their lives. They cannot escape the wrath of my **Nandaka**. I slaughtered them for justice. And now, it's time to go to the place where it all began.*

It is 428,899 CE.

*All these years, I've contained myself. I had to turn a blind eye to stupid world wars (five times by the way), slavery, colonization, **Mahabharat** war, and as if all these weren't enough humans had to have galactic wars too.*

It drove me nuts seeing innocent women and children getting trafficked, exploited. Innocent poor class men being harassed, shot or killed for no reason at all. But this ends now. I'm almost there, I can see a grayish blue planet covered in clouds.

Stepping into the land, I feel its dry texture. It's changed so much since the last time I was born as **Krishna** during the **Dwapar Yug**. Despite the bloodshed in the **Mahabharat** War, at least these places were lush, green, and cozy. There were animals, trees, and rivers. The crops and forests have all withered away over the years. I don't find a single trace of animals. The mountains which were once adorned by trees are now jam-packed with houses. The sun looks smaller, it's colder than I remember. The clouds start to darken the sky, pelting the land with foul-smelling, scarce rain.

"There's a human there," **Sukha**, my parrot, says.

I walk into a ghost town, following **Sukha's** directions. Empty ruins surround me. Back then, places like this had the smell of rain, trees, leaves, mud, moss, soil, sunlight, snow, and dewdrops. Currently, the place has a weird mix of smells, somewhere between exhaust fumes and rotten flesh, probably from the pile of dead bodies half burning and half decaying; some stuck between the ruins of the buildings, while some in the **Chihan-ghat**. Industrial fog covers the distant parts of the area.

This further infuriates me.

I wander through broken streets until I find a four feet tall middle-aged man sitting outside the deserted **Pashupatinath** temple, holding up his artificial hands. Last time I visited,

humans were much taller. Size of humans is greatly reduced now; just like they predicted in **Bhagwat Geeta**. I accost him while **Devadatta**, my white horse, keeps close to me.

The first human being I meet on planet Earth gives me a confused look.

“What are you supposed to be?” he asks, perhaps suspicious that I’m a giant.

“I’m **Kalki**.”

“Did you rent this horse from the **Asan** market?”

“No. This is mine.”

“Okay, so you got this one bred. Whoa, you must be rich.”

“What? I’m **Kalki**. I come as a doom to humanity, for **Kaliyug**, the fourth age of the world, ended yesterday. Another **Kalpa** ended.”

“Hmm...okay now tell me,” The middle-aged man continues, “Where did you earn so many bitcoins?”

“I’m here to kill you, you idiot.”

“Oh...” The man gasps. “What have I done? Are you a pig?”

“Pig?”

“Cop.”

“Oh, that pig. Anyway, it's your fault that you’re born as a human being. I’m here to cleanse.”

“That’s no reason to kill someone. I thought you caught me stealing food from the rich lady’s garden the other day.”

“So you’re a thief?”

The middle-aged man gives me a dirty look. He steps back a little, tries to speak something, but then again frowns.

“I’m not talking to you. You know it’s people like you who are the definition of ‘shady’ these days!” said the middle-aged man, stressing the word shady, and gradually stepping out of the scene.

“I’m not done talking.” I follow the man as he runs away from me.

“Yeah, well, bite me.”

Little does he know that my horse is fast as lightning. I catch him in no time. He finally looks terrified.

“Leave me alone. And no, I’m not a thief. I stole that food because I have nothing to sell anymore. You see this AI arm? Every single body part I had is sold out.”

“One needs to work to earn.”

“You think? Oh, how very enlightening,” The middle-aged man speaks in a mocking tone, “Except there’s one problem in it. The only work you get these days is prostitution, because robots can work a thousand times faster than us. I did start with prostitution, but over time my body grew unappealing to my clients, and I was kicked out. Then I started selling my organs and body parts, but that too has a stopping point. Now how am I supposed to feed myself?”

“Then, wouldn’t you be rather eased by death?”

“Maybe. Even my sisters and cousins took their lives. They couldn’t handle all this. They lived off prostitution like me, since we have a generation of prostitutes in the family, they couldn’t bear the psychological damage.”

“I’m very much tempted to say I’m sorry for your loss, however, **Dharma-shastras** say you are all reaping what you’ve sown. So I would say embrace your death.”

“I don’t mind death. I’m living like a zombie anyway.”

“Then why did you run away from me?”

“Because I was scared? Duh. C’mon, and you say you’re **Kalki**?” The middle-aged man smiles at me.

“Your death won’t be painful, because you’re honest. Much more honest than the capitalists I killed on Mars earlier today.”

And with this, I draw my sword, and behead him. I feel a little zoned out, but I can’t be sorry for this human, any human. I dash on **Devadatta** to the **Asan** market, and find my next targets. They seem unaware of my arrival. While they’re busy with their daily business, **Devadatta** gallops forward like the wind. I slay and slaughter every human there. Some try to trick me, but it’s not that easy.

For the rest of the afternoon, I take many lives, rich and poor men, women and their children, orphans, old men and women. Now, by the end of afternoon, **Sukha**, my parrot, says, “Two more people, and you’re done. They live in that hut inside the cave. One of them saw you kill people through his gadget.”

“They saw me kill, yet didn’t run away from the planet? I must admire their bravery.”

“Don’t be so sure **Kalki**,” **Sukha** replies.

For the penultimate time, I get on **Devadatta**. In a flash of a second, we’re there; in front of the hut deep inside the cave. The hut looks like it’s stood there for centuries. The ambience is tranquil.

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*I bring justice, I bring doom to evil. I've waited long enough for the fourth age of the world, **Kaliyug** to end. Finally it's time. I've been to every corner of earth where humans could possibly hide, and ended their lives. They cannot escape the wrath of my **Nandaka**. I slaughtered them for justice. It's about time to go to the place where it shall all end.*

I stop, and sigh.

Stepping into the hut, I inhale the smell of trees, resin, moss, bark, pine cones, bushes, and roots all at once. Strange, for I thought nature had shut herself on planet Earth, but here it's beautiful. My eyes shift to the open door. Books of **Dharma-shastras**, **Purans**, **Upanishads**, etc. are stacked on the dusty shelves of the library inside the room.

Someone is there.

I accost him from behind his chair. He's an old man with a wrinkled face, arms, and hands. He doesn't even flinch when I draw a sword in front of him.

"Is he dead?" I ask **Sukha**.

"No, he's just sleeping. Wait, I'll wake him up," **Sukha** says and flies towards the old man. It starts tapping, pecking and biting the old man's hands. He slowly opens his weak old eyes, caresses the parrot, and smiles at me.

"Welcome. My granddaughter is asleep upstairs. She's only nine months young. Let's keep it low or she'll wake up," he says.

"I'm **Kalki**."

"And I am experience. She's purity and innocence. I know you're here to kill us. Whom will you take first?"

“Why do you ask this question?”

“Because you bring justice, you bring nullity. I’ve seen you slaughter the entire human race. So, whom would you take first?”

“What if I don’t make this choice at all?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t do that. It would be against your **dharma**. At least, your **dharma** is equal...not relative like humans. Make the choice.”

“What if I take your granddaughter’s life first? She’s fast asleep. She wouldn’t feel a thing.”

“Then you’ll kill me without using your sword.”

“What if I take your life first?” I say as I draw out my sword.

“You don’t wanna know that.”

“I do.” I say as I looked straight into the old man’s eyes.

“Then you’ll terrorize this child’s pure heart. And she’s not reaping what she has sown, she’s just a prey of the law of **Karma**, the butterfly effect.”

“Well, I have to kill both of you at once then.”

“I am the end. She’s the beginning. If you kill both of us at once, you go against the law of the universe, the true **dharma**, not your **dharma** or my **dharma**.”

“B-but I restore justice by killing you people.”

“Yes, indeed. However, that doesn’t imply ending the entire cycle of existence. That isn’t the **dharma** I taught you, **Kalki**. Did you save any good people among the corrupt and evil? Like that middle-aged man you slaughtered? None. You saved none. You murdered them all.”

I’m taken aback. I open my mouth to say something, but quickly decide against it.

“Who-who are you?”

“Make a guess, **Kalki**, my girl,” The old man slowly fades, and turns into a bright light. The voice seems familiar this time. It’s the sweet, milky voice I grew up listening to.

“Mother!” I exclaim.

“You’ve lost the right to call me mother, **Kalki**,” my mother **Sumati** says, “**Sukha!** Bring that child. **Kalki**, take this child to heaven. She’ll be sent back after she’s been cleansed by the gods,” says the light, and it vanishes into thin air.

I walk out the cave. I look around at the emptiness. The place is desolate. There’s a gust of wind. The industrial fog, like my rage against humans, slowly clears itself.

What have I done! I scream internally.

There’s an eerie silence throughout the planet. The place is devoid of comfort or bliss. It’s stony, bleak, and unyielding. The mind-numbing and painful silence of the dead humans that lay on the ground pierces my head. A sharp stabbing pain hits my heart and mind together.

Soon enough, **Sukha**, who had disappeared after the old man faded, comes flying with a cloth pouch. There is a child in it. I peep into the cloth. She is wide awake. Her large brown eyes, like two drops of honey, set me at ease. She’s the seed to a new cycle of humans: a new inception.

Acknowledgments

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I would like to express immense gratitude to Pranab Man Singh for supporting the workshop, using the resources of Quixote's Cove to aid our progress and welcoming us to the QC community. Thank you Sachi for organizing, scheduling and managing the details of the workshop and our public relations through QC. I would also like to thank the Henry Luce Foundation for supporting my work in Nepal, and the Asia Foundation for managing my travel and professional placements.

This book is a work of fiction. All of the stories within are products of the authors' imaginations. Any reference to real places, historical events and locations are used fictitiously. All other locations, persons and events are fictional and any resemblance to real persons, events and locations are entirely coincidental.