

Writing the Bagmati

Stories from the future of
Kathmandu's greatest river

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Cover drawing by Susmita Khadka



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The in100years project is a publishing platform, workshop series and community network.

Our mission is to give space for people from around the world to speculate and imagine how we might live on a changing planet. As governments and institutions retreat from the pressing challenge of climate change and build fiercer and firmer borders, we work to do the opposite: to face the future, whatever it might hold, and to build community in our creativity.

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Thank you to the Penn Museum and the Mellon Foundation for providing grant funding for hosting the workshop series that led to this anthology.

Finally, thank you to the Bagmati River for flowing steadily for thousands of years, carrying the loss, grief, dreams, waste, garlands, ashes, sand, plastic, gold, idols, paint, pencils, plastic bags, fish, bones, boats, cups, beads, silt, leaves, cigarettes, bottles, marigolds and tears of a civilization.

We will not forget you.

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Foreword

The Bagmati River begins in the Shivapuri Hills above Kathmandu. Flowing through the rocks and trees above the valley, it joins forces with other streams, fed by groundwater and rainfall. Temples dot its banks. Steps lead down to the water, often spread with freshly washed sarees sparkling with a dusting of silt.

As it enters the city, the water changes. No longer just gray from the contents of the earth, it turns multicolor. Vibrant plastic bags and clear bottles pepper the surface, black with sewage. Broken pipes spill the flushing of toilets, sinks and factories into the water. Ancient temples still surround the river, but the smell often drives away those who would like to walk along the banks.

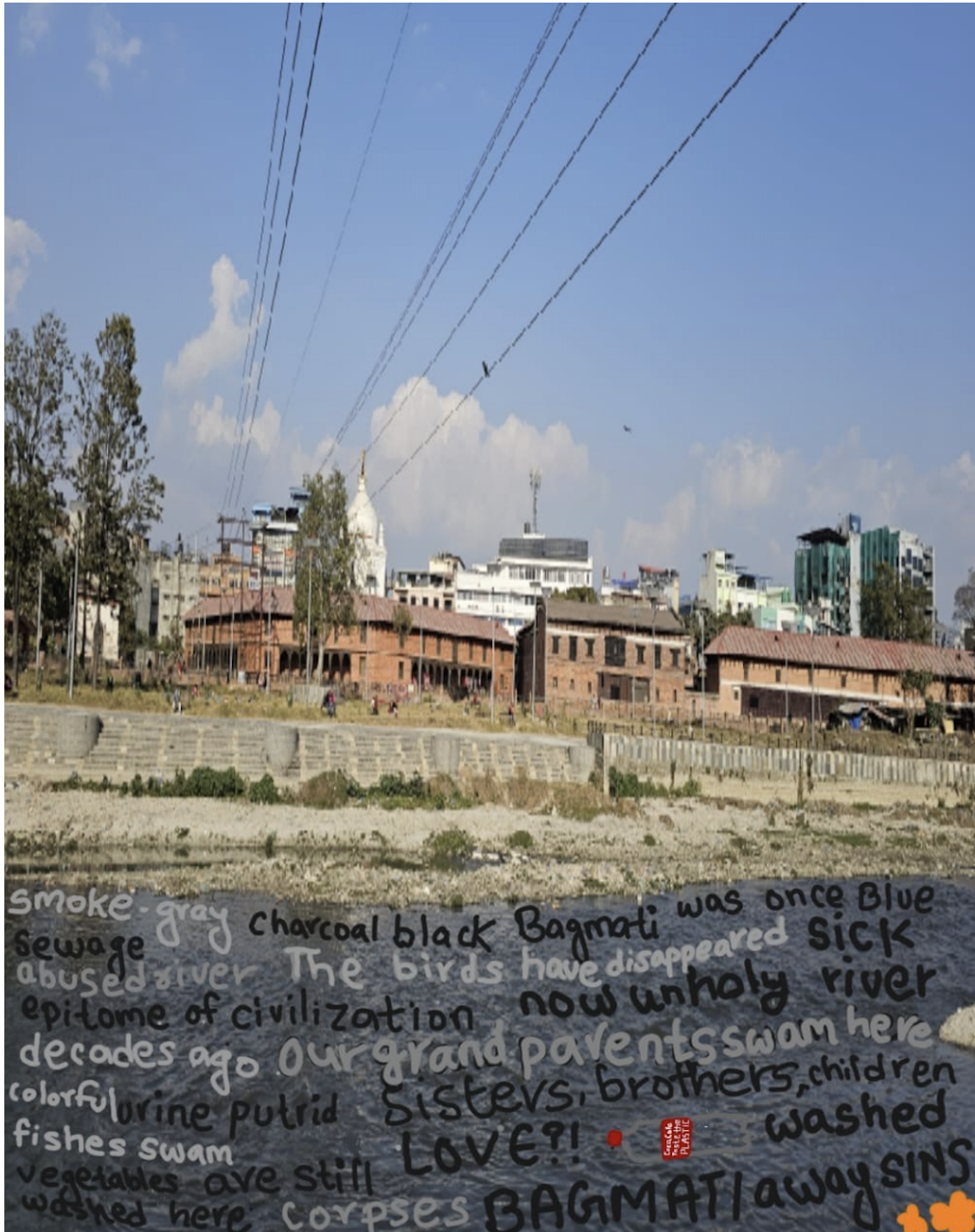
The Bagmati river is a centerpiece of Nepali civilization, where thousands of years of history have converged. It is one of the world's most significant heritage sites and the foundation of the Pashupatinath temple complex, which has existed since 400 CE and is still in use as the city's primary cremation ghat. It is also profoundly under threat. Referred to as a "dead river," the Bagmati is full of toxic effluent and plastic waste. Little can survive in its acidic and nearly oxygen-free waters. Despite numerous campaigns to install trash booms and clean up the riverbanks, the flow of trash and wastewater into the river remains unabated.

But these changes are not inevitable. Those who live near the Bagmati remember finding fish and playing in the shallows mere decades ago. The destruction of the river has taken place with astonishing speed, so it stands to reason that solving the pollution crisis could quickly heal the waterway, as has happened in rivers around the world since the rise of the environmental movement. Some scars may remain forever, but the Bagmati is capable of healing. We must only do the work to make it happen.

This anthology arose from a workshop by hosted by QC Bookshop and the In100Years Project. The authors are Kathmandu residents who have watched the river die but still believe in a brighter future.

The stories that follow imagine both how the river could change and how it could change us. Some speculate about a future where humanity destroys itself entirely, a world where little hope remains. Others write about spirits and humans joining forces to save the river, or environmental activists turning the tide. Some of the writers focus instead on the humanity implicit in our engagements with the Bagmati, from grief to hope. All of the stories ask you to pause, to stop your hurried walk along an invisible river and look at it directly, asking yourself: who is the Bagmati? And what future might she hold?

-Evan Tims

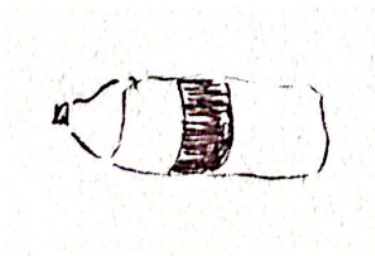


smoke-gray charcoal black Bagmati was once blue
sewage abused river The birds have disappeared sick
epitome of civilization now unholy river
decades ago our grand parents swam here
colorful urine putrid Sisters, brothers, children
fishes swam LOVE?! • washed
vegetables are still BAGMATI away SINS
washed here corpses

Ekta Adhikari

Aama Ko Khola

Deeya Dahal



“Chya hau babu, tyo khola ma nafal na fohor, aru katai lagera hurrya,” Aama’s voice caught Atul’s hand mid-arc, stopping it dead in its tracks. Aama insists on calling that dump a khola, but he cannot see the river she’s referring to. When she calls it a khola, she almost sings the word, the ends of her mouth curving in the same sigh that he imagines he sometimes hears the khalto let out. “Aama, how does a khola become a khalto?” he had asked her once, and she’d written down the words for him. She said, “Look, look at that little ta at the end. Someone just came and stuck it on, and it never left. And look, it took the only bit of hair as well!” She had stopped making much sense a while ago. He wondered how she could park herself there on the balcony all day. The stench must get to her.

But her sense of smell probably died alongside her twenty years ago. Atul never should have known his grandmother, his father tells him. “She’s supposed-to-be-dead,” his father had said at dinner once, turning up his nose. Atul’s friend’s father was a supposed-to-be-dead too. All of them smelled vaguely *off*, like a diluted version of the khalto snaking its way in front of their house.

Resuming his arc, he aimed this time, for a spot of bright pink in the gray and black of the khalto. One, two, and... down went the pink bag with its contents, buried under a neat package of everything his house had refused.

Atul looked both ways before crossing the road back to the house, just like Mamu had taught him to. So when the Corporation truck full of water came barrelling down the street and stopped an inch away from his face, he let out a shriek so shrill it pierced even Aama’s dead ears. “Atul! What happened?” she yelled, peering down from the balcony. A steady stream of curses made their way out of her mouth as the driver got off. “Maaride, maaride. Kill everybody with your purified water and your trucks. Can’t even leave a child alone, can you?”

Atul was no longer the wellspring for the driver's fury, Aama was. He looked up at her on the balcony, and seeing that she was a supposed-to-be-dead, averted his eyes and spat onto the street with such vitriol, Atul jumped back. Aama still wasn't done. "At least in our time, smugglers had the decency to be discreet. Now you lot drive through the roads in broad daylight! Aafnai bau ko bato jasari."

"Marna nasakya budi! You call what we do smuggling? What would you rather have? Hazardous water still flowing through the city? At least we purify and distribute it so runts like these – " he grabbed Atul by the scruff of his neck – "can have something to drink! Who's going to give you your precious water if not us?"

"Babu lai chhod ta paila! Let him go! We wouldn't need anyone to give us water if you'd just let the river be! "

The driver ignored her and turned towards Atul. "Use your eyes when walking," was all he said before heading back towards his truck, perhaps because Aama was watching them like a hawk.

"Did you throw it in the river, or elsewhere?" Aama asked when he finally ran back inside the house. "Aama, how many times do I have to tell you, it's not your river, it's just a pit."

"Timiharu ley ta banaka hau ni khalto," she said, lapsing into Nepali. Baba hated it when she spoke in her rapid-fire Nepali, said all she knew how to do was accuse them in it. He took a step back, but she held out her hand and called him closer. "Come, come, I'll tell you why I keep calling your khalto a river." He shuffled towards her, keeping an ear out for Mamu coming up the stairs.

"It had a name, you know? Bagmati," she said, staring off into the flood of waste packets meandering in front of their house.

"Hya, Aama, what kind of name is Bagh-mathi? How can a khalto –" he caught himself. "How can a river run above a tiger?"

"Bagmati, mora, not Bagmathi. Back when it used to be a river, it started from this place called Baghdwar in the hills. We used to cure with that water, you know? I remember when my brother got so sick, and he could barely stand, my Aama – your great-grandmother – sent me to get some water from the river. She mixed it with some foul-smelling herbs, like your khalto smells now, and the water. Next day, he was walking again!"

When Aama went on with her monologues, Atul knew there would be no stopping her.

"I suppose that's why I'm still here as well." His ears perked up.

"You mean why you're a supposed-to-be-dead?"

"So now you call me a corpse to my face?" she laughed, swatting at him. "You don't just look like your father, I suppose. Bagmati had another job too, when she was alive. She carried off the spirits of the dead with her when we went. I'm not sure what went wrong – maybe we burdened her with too many souls, or maybe we were choking her with our waste.

She continued healing, of course, but when our turn came, she did her job a little too well. I remember dozing off in the hospital, and when I opened my eyes, I could feel her between my toes, your father holding on to my hand, and the litter slowly creeping up the stairs of the aryaghat. Your father tried dipping my feet again, and again, but she refused to take me away. Since then, she's refused to take away any souls with her, and we're stuck here with you. Marna nasakeka."

"After she refused, it was free for all. Pachas barsa samma kei garna nasakeka ley rata raat corporation banaidiye! Your Corporation took her water away and turned her into this khalto. I say throw us in there as well, maybe we'll rot and settle down at the bottom at some point," she laughed. "Don't tell your father – " "Babu, ask baba to put the jar outside when he comes back, tomorrow is refill day," he heard his mother yell from downstairs, and he ran.

Atul had met about seven supposed-to-be-deads in his lifetime – each of them related to him by some distant blood. Whenever they came to visit, they hesitated, walking at a lingering pace behind the alives of the family. They huddled together on one side of the balcony, casting long glances at the khalto, their faces wearing the same expressions as Aama when she talked about the river.

Atul was walking along a river so clear it hurt to look at. Sunlight reflected off of its surface like coins, glistening, inviting him to jump right in. But he knew he couldn't. There were guards stationed every ten meters by the banks, holding menacing looking latthis and he knew that they would swat him away before he had a chance to jump in. Their shirts had a tiger stitched onto the pocket, and he could swear they growled at him as he walked past. He tried to test his luck. Pretending to sip on his water bottle, he tried taking a step towards the river, but the guard noticed. Almost imperceptibly, he turned towards him. Atul feigned walking again. What if he ran between the two guards? Would they still get him? He could almost hear the river whisper his name now. When he crossed another guard, he inched towards the river, trying to pass it off as a natural lilt in his walk, but this time, both of them turned towards him! Each movement that Atul made, the guards mimicked.

This push and pull continued for a while, until he stumbled on a pebble, and water went down the wrong pipe. Down he went, coughing, while the guards simply stood there, staring at him. He coughed, and coughed, trying to dislodge the bit of water stuck in his throat, when, to his surprise, a tiny bit of polythene came out of his mouth. Had he swallowed it accidentally? He barely had time to process it, before another, larger piece made its way up. He vomited the contents of his stomach right there on the riverbank. The guards still made no movement. They just kept staring. Something much larger tried to make its way up his

gut; he thought he could have puked out his organs, whole, and the guards still wouldn't have moved from their stations. He clawed at his throat, trying to reach his burning esophagus from the outside, when his nails began leaking black sludge, and he could feel his shoes filling up with the same stuff. He felt plastic growing out of every pore on his skin, enveloping his body, mummifying it. A plastic-pickled corpse. The guards still made no movement.

He woke with a start, clawing at his own skin. He could still feel something stuck in his throat.

“Laaaaa, they only filled half the jar?” he heard mamu downstairs. “What are we supposed to do with half a jar of water?”

The jars dried up within a month. It started with half a jar, then one thirds. The Corporation trucks began thinning out on the streets, so when a rare truck was spotted, people began swarming it like flies, pushing each other aside to get a chance to fill up their own jars. He heard his father discussing with next-door-uncle about how a group of people had overturned one of the trucks in Tinkune. “Apparently the tank wasn't even half full!” his father whispered.

And then the jar refills stopped completely. Overnight, the Corporation trucks vanished from the streets, and their officials were nowhere to be seen. Baba and a few other uncles from the neighborhood made plans to go visit the Corporation office, but they came back looking dejected. “The gate was locked,” was all he said. Aama was strangely calm about all of this, but she didn't need water like the rest of them. She would be just fine. Some of the more daring ones in the neighborhood had stocked up on water. It was a dangerous thing to do – if you stored any extra water, the Corporation would somehow catch wind of the whole thing, and come charging with their officers. Because stored water was a health hazard – Atul's teacher in school had told him so. It grew nasty bacteria that made people sick, that's why the Corporation would come take it away to purify it, or, if it was particularly bad, they would just dump it out in the khalto.

“Do we only get to drink water when you fuckers decide to give it to us?” Krishna uncle had yelled when two officers pushed him out into the street from his own house. Two others followed, holding a giant black drum – the kind that Mamu stored rice in – with gloved hands so that the contaminated water did not touch them. “You take our own water and sell it back to us as something purified, and you expect us to sit quietly about it?” he continued yelling. Baba had run out to see what the commotion was about, while Atul and Aama watched from the balcony – two sets of peering eyes above the many in the street.

Baba reached Krishna uncle just as he was about to charge at the officers holding the drum. He held on to him while they loaded the drum carefully into their truck. The other

two started walking towards Krishna uncle, but Baba ran ahead and spoke with them in low tones. The only bit Atul heard was, "I'll talk to him." The officers shot one more glowering look at Krishna uncle before getting in the truck and driving away.

"Arey, Krishna Dai, how are you of all people taking such risks? Putting your family at risk like this?" Baba said once the Corporation truck had driven away. "Such an educated man like yourself must know the risks of stored water, no?" he asked, while Krishna uncle stared vacantly at the ground. "And what's all this about them taking our water? They've filled up our jars so diligently over the years, have they not?"

"And you're okay with relying on that? The diligence of a Corporation?" Krishna uncle had shot back, almost spitting that last word out of his mouth.

Baba had no answer to give him. All of this had happened about a year ago.

However, it was Krishna uncle and other neighbors like him that came to their rescue. When they showed up with their drums of water, everyone was apprehensive, but then they boiled it, and drank it in front of everyone. Two days later, when nothing bad had happened to them, the rest of the neighborhood began warming up to them. Baba was the first one in line with their kettle. But even that water could only last so long. They reused the water, they tried recycling it, but eventually, even that began running out.

Eventually, the remaining water had to be rationed off. Each house had a daily allowance, which they were expected to be scrupulous about. No one admitted it, but everyone tried to save some water to store for the next day. Next month, Mamu banned Atul from playing outside. "You're just gonna be thirsty after all that running around, that too on top of this Chaitra-heat. Who has water to spare for that?" she'd told him. Everyone had taken to lying down, quietly, inside the house. No one wanted to move: it would simply make them more thirsty. Food was a distant memory. Atul felt like a supposed-to-be-dead in the middle of all of this. Was he? Supposed to be dead?

The only person happily tolerating all this was Aama. Bothered neither by lack of food nor water, she shambled around the house, telling everyone, "Balla dekhyau?" What were they finally supposed to see?

Wind began to pick up in the last weeks of the month. "Chait-Baisakh ko huri," Aama called it. Every year, around this time, the smell from the khalto became unbearable. When the sun was out, all the refuse collected in it would bake and cook and the rot-smell would carry for miles across the entire city when the winds came. That afternoon, wind blew all the rain-heavy clouds into the valley. Krishna uncle walked around, yelling at everyone to put their jars outside. "It looks like it's going to rain," he said, gleefully. These were truly desperate times, Atul thought. He'd read in his science book that acid-rain-water was not something to get on your skin, let alone drink. And now these people were actually waiting, no, praying, for it to rain.

The wind had been battering at their windows the entire day, and everyone was marvelling at just how dark it had gotten at just four in the afternoon. An extraordinarily violent sound – like two cars colliding – made Baba run out into the balcony, and Atul and Mamu followed. A sheet of tin – the kind that people used as roofs for older homes – came surfing on top of the waste pile in the khalto. Atul watched the wind drag the sheet along with it, and he could swear the khalto underneath it was moving too. “Oi, Krishna Dai, get back inside, do you want to get hit by that sheet?” Baba yelled.

“Just get your jar outside, Dai, just get it outside,” Krishna uncle said, almost dancing away on the street. “Mamu, look, even the khalto is moving,” Atul half-whispered.

“Don’t speak nonsense,” she said, dragging him back inside. “Do you also want to get hit by that flying sheet?”

When night fell, Atul crawled into Aama’s bed with her. She didn’t need to sleep, but Baba said her walking around kept everyone up. The smell from the khalto had made itself a cozy home in all their noses. Unable to bear it, Mamu had Atul close all the windows. When he looked out, he could swear that something was trying to dislodge itself from under the pile of trash, like the entire khalto was trying to vomit.

“Aama,” he whispered, “you keep saying “you’ll see, you’ll see.” What exactly are we supposed to see?” Almost as if his question were a cue, something big crashed outside. The wind picked up, howling, battering the windows like they were made of plastic. He could hear a scream – something let out from the pits of a stomach that is very, very hungry. He scooped closer to Aama. She kept her eyes closed, absentmindedly stroking his head. He thought he could see a smile on her face.

“She’s woken up,” Atul heard Aama say before drifting off to sleep, his dreams punctuated by the wind howling outside.

Bagmati Purgatory

Sapana King



They say that sometimes things have to get worse before they can get better, and this was certainly the case for the Bagmati.

Once she was the holiest river in Nepal; ushering kings and commoners alike into the realm of death, but the living had let her fall into such a dismal state that it'd become hard to imagine seeing the Bagmati ever restored to her former glory.

Pundits, activists, and aid organisations all tried in vain to raise the alarm and do something to save her. Perhaps it was a lack of political will, or maybe it was the ordinary folk who just didn't care enough to nurture this gift from the gods. Those who grew up in Kathmandu in the 2000s saw her at her worst - a charcoalesque stream of mystery liquid. At times, the Bagmati was nothing more than a conveyor belt for the contents of the capital city's sewers, or a vehicle for trash to hitch a ride downstream to India.

Who knew if any fish, frogs or mammals could survive there. The waters had not been translucent since the early 1990s. Only the gods could divine what lurked beneath the surface, and they quickly changed the topic if anyone brought it up. Heck, any deities dwelling in or around that putrid waterway had probably packed their bags and buggered off years ago.

And when the gods themselves had left the building, the people were left to deal with this unholy mess on their own.

The living didn't know it yet, but the waters of the Bagmati were no longer pure enough to carry out funeral rites. Any soul departing a body that'd been dipped into the Bagmati would actually become tainted by her odious touch. Not a soul could pass onto the next state of being from there, whatever fate may have been awaiting them.

The filth that people had carelessly cursed these once pristine waters with was cursing them back. The sewage, plastic, flotsam and jetsam that'd been allowed to foul the Bagmati

was coming back to haunt them. Any soul attempting to ascend from this wretched river would find itself trapped in the vile purgatory that the Bagmati had become.

Once the river had stopped being clean enough to purify souls, a handful of confused ethereal entities floated around its banks, desperately searching for an exit. If anyone able to see beyond the veil of the physical world had come across these few solitary spirits, they might've taken pity on their long faces and silent screams. After some time, the numbers of non-living Bagmati residents grew to resemble a wedding reception or festival.

One ghost of a recently departed woman lingered behind a gaggle of college students sipping *masala chiya*¹ on a riverside bench. Her mouth hung open and her tongue lolled out, wiggling in the direction of the nearest cup. "Oh, how I long to feel the creaminess of *bhainsi ko dudh*² caress my mouth one... last... time..." she moaned, tongue still wagging. "And have my tongue tickled by hints of freshly ground cinnamon, cardamom and clove." Good thing none of the living could see her, because her tongue gestures might've come across as slightly pornographic.

Other, more wayward souls the nearby UN Park, tried desperately to inhale the sweet smoke emanating from a circle of friends passing a *top*³ around in UN Park. Those *bichara*⁴ spectres were constantly tortured by being stuck in this neither-here-nor-there prison; like invisible witnesses watching the living from the other side of a two-way mirror.

Those with blood still coursing through their veins, who chose to take late-night walks without looking down at their phones, might've noticed the odd empty beer can suddenly flying across the riverside walkway on a windless night. Or, if they weren't so stoned, those UN Park smokers might've noticed S.O.S messages appearing in the clouds they exhaled.

Eventually, the population of the dearly departed passing time in Bagmati purgatory swelled to appear like an army division. After over half a century of spirits getting stuck there, an overcrowding crisis was making these damned souls very restless indeed. Let's not forget that their numbers were bolstered by the global pandemics of 2020, 2028 and 2036. As well as the Gen Z protests of 2025. And of course the Gen Alpha riots that attempted to topple the Gen Z regime in 2033.

They spent all their free time - which was, unfortunately for them, unlimited - ambling around the riverbanks or hovering miserably above the water's surface. "At least there's one advantage of being dead," one uncle-ghost announced to nobody in particular. "Since we no longer retain any of our bodily senses, we can't be assaulted by the horrifying stench of this

¹Spiced tea

²Buffalo milk

³Cigarette containing marijuana / a joint

⁴Pitiful or unfortunate

polluted river anymore.” The other ghosts nearby murmured in agreement. “How’s that for a silver lining?” the uncle-ghost guffawed and slapped his knee, even though it didn’t make a sound.

While the putrid odour of the river had terrorised the nostrils of the living for generations, by this point the mounting number of the undead were getting hot under the collar thanks to their own frustrations. They could barely take a step in any direction without passing through another spirit, and they were all dying to know when they’d be released from this inter-dimensional detention centre.

Things became unbearable for the deceased around the year 2057, after the Great Himalayan Flood ravaged Nepal. Unprecedented rainfall that year wiped out scores of villages in the Everest region. The Terai lowlands were turned into a temporary swamp, while the flood also swallowed up entire neighbourhoods in Kathmandu’s urban areas.

Even chunks of Nepal’s most sacred pilgrimage site for Hindus, the Pashupatinath temple complex, had disappeared once the flood waters had petered out. The funeral *ghats* used for cremation ceremonies had been knocked down and washed away by debris that had come cannon-balling downstream.

After the Great Himalayan Flood, citizens living nearby the river were completely at a loss. Those still in possession of a pulse feared returning to their homes. Rotting river mud clung to every surface of gutted houses, and hundreds of family members remained missing.

Post-flood, people had also come to fear being around the city’s main waterway for other reasons. Nobody could quite put their finger on it, but anywhere within strolling distance of the Bagmati had become very unsettling indeed.

“Did you just say something?” a shop assistant asked her colleague in the dimly lit cellar where they were counting stock. Sales at the ladies’ boutique where they worked had been slow, so they were sent to the store room to keep busy.

“No, but I heard it too. Whenever I’m alone in the shop I hear... voices. I’m scared to be here, especially after dark.”

“Me too! I hate being the one to lock up after the evening shift... Do you think there are ghosts or what?”

“Maybe... It could be that, but apparently this is happening in other places too. Somebody told me that there’s some kind of mental health crisis happening, but the government doesn’t want to admit it. Lots of people are hearing voices. Maybe people are going crazy from something in the water or because of all the air pollution. *Khai*⁵.”

“Yeah, maybe it’s from the pollution. Even the animals here are acting weird. My friend who lives around here said that all the cats in this neighbourhood have run away. And people who have dogs are getting rid of them because the dogs keep howling, night and day.”

⁵‘I don’t know’ [informal]

“Our boss mentioned that something funny is going on at her home. She says the moment she leaves her baby alone, it starts screaming like someone’s trying to murder it. Someone has to be with the child 24/7. Even the babies are losing their minds!”

The conversation was interrupted by the sound of an unopened box of kurtas that came crashing down from a shelf at the far end of the cellar. The two sales girls looked at each other and screamed. Their cries hadn’t even reached their full potential yet when it started to feel as if their throats were closing up. The air had suddenly become icy and heavy, like high up in the Himalayas. Barely able to inhale or exhale, and choking on their unfinished screams, the two young women scrambled to get the hell out of that store room.

Neither of them returned to the ladies’ boutique after that.

Anyone with a fraction of a sixth sense could tell that something supernatural was afoot, but nobody wanted to be accused of being crazy. Most folks just kept their suspicions to themselves.

One such psychically sensitive individual was a young girl named Aarushi. She’d recently lost her twin brother, Aarav, in the floods but the family was still desperately hoping to find him alive. Aarushi could feel that he’d already crossed the threshold between life and death, but she didn’t say anything. Her little heart was too busy mourning the other half of her soul.

In her family’s frantic efforts to find Aarav and salvage whatever valuables they could from the sludge blanketing their home, they weren’t paying attention to her. She slipped away from the house of the relatives they were staying with, several blocks away from Pashupatinath, and headed towards the temple grounds.

As she traipsed down her old street, none of the neighbours noticed her. They were too engrossed in washing off kitchen utensils, jewellery boxes and any air-tight containers that might retain something useful. Others were comforting children or the elderly who couldn’t control the streams flowing from their eyes. Aarushi had never felt so unseen before. She may as well have been a ghost.

She approached the temple’s main entrance. That day there were no guards taking ticket fees from tourists. She’d never seen Pashupati so empty before. Besides herself, there were just a handful of the local street kids and some families who’d brought their dead for cremation.

The flood waters had already retreated enough to no longer occupy the pathways within the temple grounds, but the stone steps leading down to the river were still full to the brim. Caramel-coloured water with white foam at its edges sloshed onto the courtyard tiles. Aarushi had to fight to hold onto her *chappal*⁶ when trudging across the thick layer of mud

⁶Flip flops

covering the ground. The knee-deep sludge was doing everything in its power to claim the only pair of shoes Aarushi had left to her name. Eventually, she removed her fudge-covered flip-flops and carried them by hand.

Aarushi made her way to the footbridge arching over the river. *It's a miracle that this wasn't washed away too*, she thought, her eyes searching the empty spaces where the cremation ghats once stood. Then she harrumphed. *What was a miracle anyway?*

She hoisted herself up and threw a leg over the wall of the bridge to sit astride it. She was small for a 10-year-old, but wiry enough to scramble up there. She turned her gaze to the fast-flowing waters that gushed below her feet.

If she'd been in a better mood, she might've imagined that the water resembled a pot of milk tea bubbling away on a stove top. The brown leaves and tree branches that bobbed up and down reminded her of *chiya patti*⁷ popping up before disappearing beneath the steaming, frothy surface again.

Aarushi and her brother used to come to this bridge and play silly games to pass the time. They'd sit up on the wall, like she was doing at that moment, and play spot-the-*phohor*⁸. They'd wait for pieces of rubbish like food packaging or a chappal to come sailing downstream under the bridge. Whoever could identify the type of trash first and shout its name correctly got to punch the other one in the arm. "*Chappal!*" Punch. "*Chau chau packet!*" Punch. "Finger of a glove!" Punch. (This one had actually been a condom.)

Everything around her reminded Aarushi of Aarav. The places they used to play. The tiny shop in the ground floor of a neighbour's house where they used to buy loose sweets from a jar. Or, if their parents refused to put any crumpled-up loose rupee notes into their little fists, they'd drop hints until the *sahuji*⁹ or his wife gave them a freebie.

On her way to Pashupatinath just now, Aarushi had passed the bus stop where she and her brother used to wait in the mornings. The last time they'd taken the bus together they'd had a spat about something stupid, and now she regretted giving him the silent treatment on the way to school. If she'd known then that it would be their last bus ride together, she would've rather held his hand and told him all the things she liked about him. How he was an excellent soccer player, and how he was smarter than all the kids in their class even though he never studied. She was especially grateful for the way he stood up for her when the elders used to berate her for preferring to read books instead of socialising at family gatherings. He'd always come to comfort her if someone in the family had shouted at her and made her cry.

But now it was too late to tell him any of these things; he was gone. He'd been out playing soccer with friends the evening when the Bagmati broke its banks. After that, he

⁷Small pieces of loose-leaf tea, typically used in South Asia.

⁸trash

⁹shopkeeper

never came home again. In the days since, nobody in the family had voiced that he might be dead. They just kept going to the police station and asking around the neighbourhood, but Aarushi knew the truth.

At some point during the night when he'd disappeared, Aarushi felt something inside her break. She knew very little about biology. Could it have been her heart? Perhaps it was her soul that'd snapped in half, but that was also hard to say. Nobody really knows exactly where the soul is located in the body, or if it exists at all.

No matter what you believe, Aarushi hadn't been the same since that fateful night. She hadn't wanted to eat, no matter how much her mother coaxed her and tried to shovel *dal bhat*¹⁰ into Aarushi's mouth, directly with her own fingers. Her mother's *chura*¹¹ jingled with every handful of food she tried to force into her daughter's face. Aarushi had also been struggling to sleep. At night she lay awake, wondering where her brother was now, or rather, where his soul was going. After the lights went out, she'd cried and cried. She couldn't bear the thought of going through life without him. *What is a twin without their other half?*

Aarushi sat on the red brick wall, legs swinging absent-mindedly above the gushing Bagmati. Again, she marvelled at how the metal structures that used to shield cremations from rain were now completely gone. Chunks of the stones that had once formed the foundation of each *ghat* had also been chipped away at.

Those burning *ghats* had seemed to exist independently of time. For Aarushi, they'd always just been there. The tourists ambling past and gawking, sure, they came and they went. The elderly people who selected Pashupati for their cremations - to be granted a better rebirth in the next life - they, too, came and went. But those pieces of stone and metal that held space for the bodies of the deceased to undergo their last rites? It was impossible to fathom how they could disappear into thin air.

And what of her brother whom she loved more than anyone else? How could he, too, cease to be there? Aarushi started to notice thoughts that she'd never imagined having before. *Maybe I should also allow myself to be carried away by the currents? Mero Ghar batkieko chha*¹². *My brother is gone. I don't want to live without him. I just want this pain in my chest to stop.*

Aarushi slowly lifted her feet and rested them atop of the wall she'd been straddling. With wobbling caution, she pushed herself up by her hands and straightened her body. She turned to face the waters stretching out before her. In the raging stream of milk tea beneath her bare feet she saw the odd empty water bottle. Plastic bags. Pieces of wood and, as per usual, someone's lost *chappal*. As she stared at the murky torrent beneath her feet; she felt no qualms about jumping in. It seemed like the obvious solution to end her suffering, and

¹⁰Traditional Nepalese staple meal of rice, lentil soup and vegetable curry.

¹¹Glass bangles

¹²"My home is destroyed."

the only way she could be reunited with Aarav.

She inhaled. A breeze blew from behind her, sending her hair forwards, brushing past her cheeks as if guiding her in the right direction. She closed her eyes for a moment, and suddenly she felt them become warm and wet. She thought about her parents. *Mua, Bua...* *I don't want to make you sad, I know this will break your hearts.* She sniffed a few times, her breath coming in short, sharp bursts. *But I've made up my mind. I have to do it.*

“Don’t do it,” a familiar voice came from beside her.

Startled, Aarushi nearly lost her footing. She opened her eyes and turned to where the voice was coming from. When she saw who’d spoken to her, her heart almost stopped. Standing beside her on the wall was her dear brother, Aarav, but he looked different. His usually golden brown skin had become a dull, greyish colour, like the catfish that their family sometimes ate. His formerly bright, shining eyes also seemed dull, and not as deep a black as they used to be. Instinctively, she reached out to take his hand, but in the space where she could see it, it felt as if nothing was there.

“Come down and let’s talk,” he said, sensing the panic in her eyes.

Being a good little sister (she’d been born a whole fifteen minutes after him), she obliged, and together they walked up a set of stairs to the nearby forest. There, they sat down beneath a sprawling *banyan* tree and talked for the first time since Aarav had slipped away from the realm of the living.

During that conversation, Aarav didn’t go into the nitty-gritty of how he’d met his untimely end. But, as Aarushi had instinctively known, he’d lost his life a few nights ago. “The past is the past,” he said sagely. What he really wanted to discuss, however, was the pressing issue that he faced since crossing over to the other side. He tried to paint a picture of the unbearable situation of the non-living around the Bagmati.

“Sis, it’s like the crowds we see every year during *Shiva Rartri*¹³. There are *lakhs*¹⁴ and *lakhs* of ghosts here. We can barely move; there’s just body after body after body...” he paused. “Well, we don’t have bodies anymore, but you know what I mean.”

Aarushi looked around, her eyes wide as *nanglo*¹⁵ baskets. “Are they here right now?” she gasped.

“Yeah, can’t you see them?” Aarav replied, his head cocking to the side.

“No!” she yelled, jumping up from the *chautari*¹⁶ encircling the banyan tree.

¹³Maha Shiva Ratri or ‘the Great Night of Shiva’ is Nepal’s largest Hindu festival that takes place at Pashupatinath temple every year.

¹⁴A unit in the Indian numbering system equal to 100,000.

¹⁵A *nanglo* is a flat, round, hand-woven tray or basket made from thin strips of bamboo, commonly used in Nepal for processing grains and in daily household chores.

¹⁶A traditional Nepalese public resting place, typically a platform built around a sacred tree.

“*Aram*¹⁷, *aram*, sis,” Aarav tried to calm her down. “I guess you can’t see them, but don’t worry. They won’t hurt you. They’re just like me - people who died but are somehow trapped in this place. They believe that something’s wrong with the river. It’s too dirty so our souls cannot be cleaned and reincarnated or reach nirvana, or...” he made circling gestures with his hands. “Some guys have been here for more than 50 years. Can you believe it?”

Aarushi just stood there, staring at the apparition of her late brother, unable to speak.

“You know,” he continued, leaning closer to her as if he were about to share some particularly juicy gossip, “I’ve even seen King Birendra wandering around here, in his *jhilke*¹⁸ crown with that loooong feather on top. And Prince Dipendra is here too! But the aunties say they never talk to each other.”

Aarushi’s nerves started to settle down and be overtaken by curiosity. The Nepalese royal family massacre had wiped out much of their monarchy back in 2001, long before the twins were born, but their grandmother had often talked about the last “real” king of Nepal. Whenever the politicians were up to their tricks again, *Hajuuraamaa*¹⁹ had lamented the loss of their god-king. She pretty much blamed all of Nepal’s misfortunes on the country’s loss of divinely-appointed leadership. She would tell the twins embellished tales of the tragic ending of the Shah dynasty, and wax lyrical about the “good old days” when Nepal was ruled by a monarch wearing a bejewelled crown topped off with the extravagant tail feathers of a now-extinct bird from some far-away, exotic island.

As if the mere thought of Aarushi’s grandmother had summoned the late family matriarch, Aarav suddenly blurted out, “Oh, *Hajuuraamaa* is here. She has a message for you.”

This really caught Aarushi by surprise. “Where? Where?” she looked around. *Hajuuraamaa* had passed away about a year before, and Aarushi still missed her grandmother terribly.

“She’s right here next to me, can’t you see her? Okay! Okay! I’ll pass on the message, just give me a chance, Aamaa!”

Aarushi watched him expectantly. She was a little disappointed that she couldn’t talk directly to her beloved granny.

“*Aamaa* says she knows it was you who put her dentures in the dog’s water bowl that last *Dashain*²⁰ before she died, but she forgives you. She’s actually laughing about it now.”

“Please tell *Aamaa* I’m sorry,” she mumbled, biting at her lip and not knowing where to look.

¹⁷‘Relax’ in Nepali.

¹⁸In Nepali slang, ‘jhilke’ can mean something flashy, similar to ‘bling’.

¹⁹Grandmother.

²⁰Dashain is one of the biggest national holiday periods in Nepal’s calendar.

“It’s okay,” Aarav continued, “she knows it was our stupid cousin who put you up to it. And besides, since *Aamaa* doesn’t have an earthly body anymore, she can’t take off her *chappal* and beat you with it!”

The twins had to stifle laughs like they used to when getting up to mischief together, which had been quite frequently. For the first time since her brother had died, Aarushi felt something besides overwhelming sadness.

“*Hey Bhagwaan*²¹!” Aarav suddenly shot up like a soldier standing to attention.

“Uh, sis, King Birendra is here now. *Namaskar*, your majesty,” he bowed so low that his head almost touched his knees.

“Oh, sorry *Aamaa*, I don’t know the right thing to say! That’s just what I heard in the movies. . . I mean *your highness*.” He bowed again, this time folding over double like a paper clip. Then he turned back to Aarushi, “The King is talking to *Aamaa*. He says we need your help.”

As if *Aamaa* and the King weren’t both within earshot, Aarav added in a stage whisper, “I think *Aamaa* might die again; she looks so shocked.”

Aarushi forced a half-hearted laugh. As wonderful as it was to see Aarav again, she couldn’t quite believe her eyes and ears. An uneasy feeling was trying to claw its way up from her stomach. *What in the name of Shiva is going on here?* she asked herself. She looked around, although she still wasn’t able to see the others present, besides Aarav. For a moment she wondered if it was all a dream, or if she were losing her mind, so she pinched herself. *Ouch*, it hurt.

“The King says we need to find a way to sort out the river, otherwise all these souls will never be able to move on. He’s tired of staying here and looking at this shameful mess. Oh, and *Aamaa* says she can’t handle being stuck here with all the relatives. She wants to be reincarnated as soon as possible so she doesn’t have to listen to them anymore.”

Aarushi was trying her best to keep up. “Um, okay Aarav, but what am I supposed to do about it? Do you want me to start picking up *phohor* with my bare hands or what?”

Aarushi could see that Aarav was nodding his head and being spoken to. She waited for his response.

“Okay, so King Birendra has a plan. . .” Aarav started. “His informants have overheard that some government ministers will be coming here soon to do a TV interview. When they come, you need to go and give them a message.”

Aarushi stared at her brother and blinked a few times. “And say what?”

After nodding and mm-hmm-ing and making sounds of agreement, Aarav turned back to his sister. “His royal highness says you will be given information on a need-to-know basis. You’ll just have to wait and see.”

²¹Exclamation similar to ‘Oh Lord!’

“*Hareeee*²²,” Aarushi muttered, rolling her eyes. *Today is going to be one hell of a day.*

Later that afternoon, as the King had said, some members of parliament arrived at Pashupati’s Bishwarup *mandir*²³ for a press interview. In their suits and *dhaka topis*²⁴, the *mantris*²⁵ had gathered to announce the government’s post-flood action plan.

As the TV crew was setting up their camera equipment, Aarushi, Aarav, and the invisible presence of *Aamaa* and King Birendra watched from a distance. Aarushi was finding it harder and harder to breathe. She had no idea how she’d walk right up to government bigwigs and make them listen to her. She was just a girl. Besides, admitting that she was seeing spirits and in communication with a dead king might come across as more than a little loopy.

“Hey, look at me,” Aarav said softly. In tune with her feelings as always, he tried to assure her that everything would be alright. As of yet, Aarushi had still received no clear instructions.

When the cameras and lights had all been set up, and the film crew was finally ready, Aarushi got her first prompt. “His royal highness says you must go to the *mantris* now,” Aarav relayed to her. “And it’s better if you’re crying and look very upset. You have to tell them that you got separated from your family in the flood.”

Her face melted into a grimace and she just looked at her brother, her eyes pleading that this was just a joke. “Go on, *jau*,” he continued. “We’ll be here with you every step of the way. We’re all rooting for you!”

His smile made her a little less uneasy, but she was still terrified. Regardless, she started walking towards her mark. Fortunately, her nerves made it easy to play the part and start crying. After all the events of the past few days, she truly was at her wit’s end.

The interview was just about to begin, but as the young girl in tears entered the camera frame, the press briefing had to be put on hold. The camera crew decided to keep recording, though, in case they got some good footage. “I can’t find my Moooooommy,” Aarushi wailed. In between taking big gulps of air, she sobbed. “Please, help me! I don’t know where my family is!” She really laid it on thick, and the adults around her ate it up.

One of the government officials present, the spokesperson for the Prime Minister’s office, didn’t miss a beat. He rushed in to scoop her up, patting her on the back and cooing, “there, there *nanu*²⁶, we’re going to help you.” He made sure to do this in view of the cameras. He

²²A religious exclamation in Hinduism, used similarly to “Oh Lord!” in English.

²³A temple.

²⁴Traditional Nepalese men’s hat made from a woven, patterned fabric.

²⁵Government ministers.

²⁶‘Little girl’

even turned to make sure they captured his good side. All his years of media training were sure coming in handy.

Following his lead, the other officials scuttled closer to Aarushi, also hoping to be caught looking heroic in the spotlight.

“Tell us where your *Ghar*²⁷ is, *nanu*. We’ll take you home immediately!” one of the female members of parliament said, wresting Aarushi away from the spokesperson. She turned to face the camera for her own close-up, flashing her brightest smile.

Aarushi began to tremble. She didn’t like being manhandled by strangers, and she worried about what’d happen if these ‘important people’ found out she wasn’t telling the truth. Just then, Aarav appeared beside her. “Good job, sis! You’ve got ‘em right where we want them... Now, say you’ve got a personal message for each of them. Just trust us, this is gonna work!”

Aarushi looked at her brother with tears in her blinking, brown eyes. He nodded at her reassuringly. She gave a little nod back. Over the next five minutes, something would happen that’d change the fate of the Bagmati forever.

After carefully listening to Aarav’s instructions, Aarushi went on to repeat what he had said, word for word. Wiping away tears on the back of her hand, she announced to everyone present: “I am here today to deliver a message from his royal highness, the late King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah. Please hear me out, sirs and ma’ams, as I will soon prove to you that I am speaking the truth.

“His message is of the utmost importance, and every last one of you will face endless humiliation if his words are not heeded and acted upon without delay.”

The small crowd of visitors from the TV station, the government ministers and their aides all fell silent. Then, a high-pitched cackle broke the silence. The witch-like laughter, which was alarmingly loud right next to Aarushi’s ear, came from the Agriculture Minister who had Aarushi perched on her hip.

“Ah hahahahaaaa, *nanu*. Wow, you’ve got quite an imagination. And a sense of humour too! Okay, time to let the grown-ups do their work,” the lady said, letting Aarushi drop to the ground unceremoniously.

“Ouch, that hurt!” Aarushi complained, rubbing her rump as she got back up. Her eyes narrowed and she pointed a finger directly at the lady minister. “Excuse me, *ma’am*, but if I were you I wouldn’t be so rude. I happen to know many things about you, things that you certainly wouldn’t want your colleagues or the media to find out about. You should treat me with some respect.”

²⁷home

All the adults looked around before laughter exploded from them. No one could believe the audacity of this little girl, who wasn't even wearing any shoes. Aarushi's face grew hot and her hands balled into fists by her sides. "EXCUSE ME!" she yelled, but none of the adults could control their laughter.

"I am in direct contact with the spirit world, and his royal highness, King Birendra," she was bellowing to be heard over the cacophony of sniggers and guffaws. "Don't believe me? Well, I'll prove it to you," she said, with a matter-of-fact tone that piqued the interest of her audience. She pointed at the lady minister who'd let her fall to the ground and announced: "This lady isn't even wearing any *kattu*²⁸."

And oh boy, the first round of laughter that had erupted was nothing compared to the second. Everyone present was howling and slapping their thighs, tears streaming from their eyes.

Everyone, except for the lady minister. The colour had drained from her cheeks and she hadn't joined in the hysterics this time. Once the noise had quietened down, a strong gust of wind, coming seemingly out of nowhere, whirled around the temple courtyard where they stood. The wind was so forceful that it blew the lady minister's long skirt all the way up over her head.

And much to everyone's embarrassment, it was revealed that she was, indeed, not wearing any underwear.

The wind disappeared as quickly as it had arrived, and with it, the sound of laughter also exited from the courtyard.

"Are you ready to listen now?" Aarushi scowled, her arms folded across her chest. Her bare, mud-covered foot was tapping the ground impatiently. Her audience was too stunned to speak, so Aarushi could finally take the floor. She started by clearing her throat. Then, she let them have it.

"The King would like to say the following: Due to decades and decades of poor leadership and a lack of political will to take care of Nepal's precious natural resources, the Bagmati has fallen into such a foul state that it is no longer pure enough to cleanse the souls of our dead, and allow them to travel onto their next state of being.

"Those among the living are blissfully unaware, but all the funeral rites performed along these shamefully polluted parts of the Bagmati river have resulted in the souls of the deceased becoming trapped here. The ensuing population crisis of the non-living has become so dire that I, the last true King of Nepal, am ordering you to do something about it.

"I, Birendra Bir Bikram Shah, command that you," Aarushi pointed to all the ministers who were barely able to conceal their pot bellies under their tailored suits, "the guardians of our nation and its natural resources, must take immediate action to reverse the conditions

²⁸underpants

that are causing the Bagmati to entrap souls and cause them untold suffering.

“If you do not take action, and restore the Bagmati to its former state as a river pure enough to cleanse the sins of worldly life, then you too will meet eternal anguish when you yourself are one day cremated on the banks of this wretched river.”

Aarushi paused to take a breath and let the message sink in. She also needed a moment to get her next instructions from her gang of undead conspirators.

“Oh, and I have some personal messages coming through from the other side for our respected members of parliament.

“Madame Minister of Agriculture and Livestock Development,” Aarushi said, locking eyes with the woman whose underwear, or lack thereof, was no longer a secret.

“There is a man here who says he used to work on your family’s tea plantation in Ilam. He’s saying something about a . . . Oh dear, a *beef farming* operation that made your family very rich? And apparently when he threatened to expose your family’s dodgy dealings - we are living in a predominantly Hindu nation, after all - your grandfather had him fed to the pigs. Well, this man is trapped in purgatory with all these other wretched souls because he was denied a proper burial.

“He insists that you contact his village shaman and perform the necessary rites to have his spirit freed from the shackles of this in-between world, please and thank you.”

Her spirit guides then directed Aarushi to address the spokesperson of the Prime Minister.

“And you, sir, have done something really too treacherous to even comprehend. The King is personally offended by what you have done, and he says that if he still had hands, he would certainly use them to strangle you. The *Shripech* - Nepal’s priceless royal crown - was stolen and sold on the black market, thanks to information that *you* gave to a syndicate of thieves. Oh, King Birendra is absolutely not amused, he can’t bear to even think about what you did.”

The spokesman’s mouth hung open, though he couldn’t seem to find the right words to say.

“Oh,” Aarushi had something to add. “The spirit of your mother is coming through. She says she wishes she had never given birth to you, and to use her words, ‘*Ta Gadha hos!*²⁹’”

A tear rolled silently down the spokesman’s cheek and Aarushi moved on to her next target.

“And you, Mr. Home Minister, sir. Your late wife is here. *Oof*, she’s really mad. Really, *really* mad. Please wait a moment, I can’t quite get the message; there’s a hullabaloo going on here, let me tell you!

“*Oh no!*” Aarushi cupped her hands over her mouth. “Oh no, he didn’t!”

The Home Minister, an older gentleman known for being staunchly nationalistic and

²⁹‘You’re a donkey,’ which when used as a slang term or insult, refers to a stupid person.

who openly expressed anti-Indian sentiments, appeared puzzled, as if he couldn't possibly imagine what kind of dirt anyone could have on him.

"Sir, your wife is asking me to take a *chappal* and beat you with it, but I forgot my shoes at the bridge earlier. Sorry about that, ma'am, but," Aarushi continued addressing the Home Minister. "Your late wife wants to express her fiercest disapproval of the shrine you have made for Priyanka Chopra-Jonas in the home you once shared together.

"She says you have hurt her more than words can express, and she is so ashamed that you took pictures from Priyanka and Nick Jonas' wedding and photoshopped your own face over Nick Jonas'.

"She's adding that your grandchildren have discovered your shrine, and that they laugh at you behind your back all the time."

The Home Minister, too, had nothing to say. He just lowered his gaze and started kicking at a spot of bird poop on the ground.

"And last, but not least," Aarushi said with a sigh; she was starting to run out of steam. She turned her attention to the Minister of Health and Population.

"Wow, I see why you're the minister of 'population' - you sure are doing the most to boost the number of citizens in Nepal. Besides having *kati ho kati*³⁰ mistresses across the country, and twelve children - no, actually, number thirteen is on the way - you might consider yourself a family man of sorts.

"But I'm getting news from someone who passed away in your *gau*³¹ last year who says that you skipped your father's most recent *shraddha*³² because you were taking your new girlfriend to Thailand. Wow, just wow. All of the deceased over here are shaking their heads at you, sir. *Laaj lagdaina?*³³

After getting a thorough dressing-down from a psychically well-connected 10-year-old girl (and by extension, the late King of Nepal), and essentially being blackmailed by their own disgruntled dead relatives and associates, the sheepish government officials had no choice but to comply with the demands Aarushi relayed to them. The TV crew had caught it all on camera, after all, and Aarushi had passed on instructions to them about what to do with the footage if the government officials didn't obey King Birendra's commands.

And as if by magic, the government of Nepal suddenly declared that cleaning up the Bagmati, and other rivers where funeral rites were performed, was a matter of national urgency.

³⁰countless

³¹village

³²Annual death anniversary rituals to honour and appease close relatives who have died

³³"Aren't you ashamed?"

And in stark contrast to the past, the highest officials of the land not only found enough financial resources to tackle the problem, but they were also seen to be actively joining environmental campaigns and getting their hands dirty. When citizens and news reporters quizzed them about why they'd changed their tune, their faces suddenly glazed over and they looked as if somebody had just walked over their graves. No mantri dared to speak truthfully on the matter, but within a year - as the King had demanded in his list of stipulations - certain measurable changes had been made.

Although the Bagmati still smelled like a public bathroom a year later, and many of the factors that had led to its demise had not yet been fully dealt with, the tides had begun to turn.

Experts predicted that the full restoration of the Bagmati to a pristine waterway and a healthy, life-supporting ecosystem would still take decades, but in the meantime, citywide trash booms had been set up to catch and recycle plastic waste. Lawmakers had also passed regulations that imposed heavy fines and even jail time on business owners caught polluting the river or the areas around it. Project plans for sewage treatment plants had been submitted to the relevant government departments, and the construction process was due to begin any day now. This project alone would probably take a decade or so to complete, but better late than never, right?

These were just a few initial solutions that helped the fate of the Bagmati to change its course. And every year following the Great Himalayan Flood of 2057, the same group of people who had gathered at Bishwarup Mandir on the Pashupati temple grounds - the TV channel news crew, the blackmailed politicians, Aarushi, Aarav and the ghosts of old King Birendra and *Aamaa* - reconvened at the same spot for a briefing on the progress of the Bagmati.

Although the river's restoration would still take years and years to complete, some members of the group weren't bothered by this. Aarushi was grateful to be able to see and talk to her brother for as long as possible. And King Birendra's spirit didn't seem to be in a rush to move on from the land that he had dedicated his life (and afterlife) to.

Years later, when the now-retired Home Minister (and die-hard Priyanka Chopra-Jonas simp) asked the ghost of the former monarch whether or not he was growing impatient about fixing the Bagmati, those who could see the undead would've seen King Birendra just smile, and gently stroke his handlebar mustache.

"I'm not in any great rush," the last reigning monarch of Nepal replied, sounding somewhat amused. "I have all the time in the world... But if you yourself don't want to be locked up in Bagmati purgatory with the rest of us, then it is perhaps better that you don't take too much time."

How do we Love an Abused River?

Ekta Adhikari



I don't know how to love an abused river
a dying river going through third stage cancer: the Bagmati

I don't how to love Bagmati but I have heard love stories of her
my grandfather who swam with her and learnt to dance along her in waves
from wrinkled and teary clouded eyes and feeble voice, I have heard of Bagmati
how she fed nutrients to plants
swimming towards them
soothing them with water and fertile soil
she brought herbs in her banks to cure away illnesses
quenched the thirst of birds, humans, dogs, leopards, cows, and buffaloes
raised fishes in her belly to feed the hungry
and sometimes,
loved people and buildings too much,
drowning them to befriend them forever as corpses
longing for friendships
travelling in between mountains and plains
from glacier to ocean
I don't know how to love Bagmati whose liveliness I had no chance
to witness.

I don't know how to love unholy Bagmati that was once holy
Lonely, toxic, angry, and once a beloved of all,
I don't know how to love her
the one who lashes out in anger on cities and people
teasing lives

with her hungry swollen belly in monsoon
 hungrier each year
 avenging
 I love and pity her
 But I don't know if I can
 actually love and avenge her.

her intestines turned into sandmines
 crushers crushing her body forever
 as she churned her anger into flash floods
 I don't know how to calm a raging river—
 men urinating over her
 throwing away corpses of animals
 to dip human corpses in the same water for her blessings
 washing away heinous sins
 her body currented to kill her children and fishes
 her body tortured through humiliating sewage
 I don't know how to love an abused river.
 I don't know how to love a river who mourns herself
 carrying away sins of dead corpses in her belly
 longing for spaces—I understand—her need
 But then
 She overlaps lands
 As an untamable river
 rightfully demanding land that was once hers
 a life that she was and now a graveyard of memories
 I don't know how to love a dying river.

I don't know how to love
 But I dream and long
 To caress her water body without covering my nose
 To get rid of the plastics in her body like lice and mites in her head
 I don't know how I am supposed to love a river
 But I yearn to see her recover
 I don't know how I can love and heal her
 But I know she needs the love and care of us all
 We don't know how to love a sickened river
 But we must cure her illnesses-

diseases born of our greed and carelessness
unjustly projected towards her
we MUST
befriend her before she reaches 4th stage cancer
turning into a hungry lunatic
swallowing away lives and civilization,
anytime, for revenge.

She Flows Against All Odds

Aparna Singh



A hazy winter sun peeks through floral bedsheets between the squatter homes. It is thirty-five degrees in the middle of December, the heat stubbornly clings on to Neeva's skin. Winter here no longer remembers how to be cold. The streets lie unusually bare. Few people walk past the settlements anymore, but Neeva is used to moving through cities on foot, used to crossing boroughs in New York.

As Neeva makes her way across the ghats of the Bagmati, the stench reaches her before the river does; sharp and invasive, flooding her senses and settling heavy in her chest. The sound coming from the water tank overpowers the sound of the river, now only a soapy liquid exiting the sewage system. A big garbage pile that sluggishly pushes the thin, grey strand. What is she, and what have they made her? Continually abused for generations. Once a holy river, Bagmati has now almost become extinct.

A pack of vultures rhythmically encircles the river. They are adept at competing with the eagles, scavenging the carrion; they know their craft well. A hyena is eating the carcass of what seems to be a dog, pulling flesh from its blood-solidified, spiky hair. Meanwhile, the stray dogs are waiting for the hyena to leave. Their eyes appear soulless and lost.

The river has become one with the squatters, and there is a distinct disconnect between them and the rest of the city. She walks towards the ghat to look at the flowing waste and notices a faint smoke coming out of an old pati. Strange. No one lives here anymore, or dies. Everyone uses electric, smoke-free cremators these days. She follows the smoke and ends up in front of a black curtain, as though marking the entrance to a different realm. She steps into the courtyard and hears the hum of prayers.

She is almost blinded by a glaring light, but the scenery is too beautiful to not look at. There are trees here. Actual trees, not the fake plastic ones outside her house. The river is

crystal clear, and bright red fish glide smoothly through the river. All of this existed, still exists? Colorful flamingos are drinking from the river. She approaches them with caution and ruffles their velvety feathers. Water buffaloes bathe nearby.

“This is God’s land, always has been, always will be. No human or humanoid shall ever replace us”, whispers a voice from behind her. She can tell it is the voice of an old woman, but one that exudes enormous strength and power.

Horrified, Neeva looks behind her. “Who are you and why have you come here”? The voice asks.

“I...I am so sorry. I...I kind of lost my way in here.” Neeva stutters.

An old woman appears amidst the smoke, her body outlined with her hair falling down to her knees. “You have stepped into the heavenly abode of Khatta Āji. I am an ancestral spirit, a protector of this neighborhood, its families and children even before the land existed.”

“The khyāh has been trying to invade for quite some time. But I don’t argue with spirits—I command them.” Khatta Āji utters. Neeva feels Khatta Āji’s words vibrate through the courtyard, not as sound but as pressure, like the river itself has inhaled. The birds freeze mid-sip. “You hear her, don’t you?” Khatta Āji says, turning now, her eyes no longer clouded with age but sharp, ancient, almost amused. “Most humans don’t.”

“I,” Neeva swallows. “I can feel... everything. It’s muffled, but I can hear her.” “Good,” she replies. “That means you’re not fully lost yet. Hence, you are the chosen one. You walk seamlessly between the two worlds.”

Neeva looks down at her hands. They are trembling, but not with fear. Something else is coursing through her, a recognition she can’t name. Memories that are not hers flicker, women washing clothes on stone steps, smoke from the cremations, lamps floating on the river’s skin along the lotus flowers.

“Why show me this?” Neeva asks. “Why now?”

Khatta Āji glides toward the river. With each step, the stones glow and expose another path for her to step on. “Because you walk between worlds,” she says. “Because you are the only one chosen to save her.” She gestures toward the river. The clear water ripples, and then turns murky. Beneath the living river, Neeva sees the other Bagmati: the grey strand, the garbage, the carcasses. Both coexist at once.

“They buried us, polluted us, tried to kill us,” Khatta Āji says. “But spirits do not die so easily. The river remembers. Land remembers. But, do humans?”

“She was never dead. They just buried her alive, and now she is in flames.” Khatta Āji takes a closer look at Neeva and whispers, “The river lives in you, and you have what it takes to save her.”

The courtyard suddenly dissolves.

Neeva stumbles back onto the ghat. The pati stands hollow and cold, no smoke, no

prayers. The carcass-eating dogs give Neeva a dead stare for interrupting their meal. As she lays there on the ground, she hears her. Beneath the generators. Beneath the traffic. Beneath the long, practiced indifference of the city. A breathing river. Neeva gets up, shakes the dust from her dress and turns toward the road. The sun begins to set yet still unforgiving. Something within Neeva shifts. Somewhere beneath all the waste and the noise, the Bagmati is still flowing—and Khatta Āji is still watching.

One Sock, One Grief

Adishya Sharma



Before it could begin, it ended. Maya's hope succumbed to despair before it could be born. She was twelve, bursting with life but Bagmati, as dead as it seemed, yet fiercely alive at the same time swallowed everything that mattered: her mother, Anita.

Maya was beautiful. Her hair cut short by her mother, a small bow tucked neatly, moles kissing her cheeks, she was the apple of Anita's eyes. If anything mattered to Anita, it was Maya. She was proud of her daughter in a way that made the air shimmer with love.

"Her lips are curled like mine, her feet are just like yours. She's totally like us," Anita would tell Dinesh, her voice soft and triumphant. Dinesh could only smile, slow and simple like a cow's warmth, and kiss his little daughter. He would sing to her, "Maya, she's woven like stars and dust. Our Maya, I could give her the universe, Ani."

Like her name, *Maya*, she radiated light and warmth, the kind that could make stones smile. She carried laughter like Lenker's song in her chest, innocent and unguarded. And then with the snap of her teacher's word, it was all gone.

"Send Maya with her bag, her mother is no more."

This sentence pierced her heart into two pieces. It wrapped around her tiny shoulders—the same shoulders Anita had caressed with such care. They were so small, so fragile, that even her bag seemed too heavy to rest upon them. Every step she took felt like carrying the weight of the world, a burden she could not understand, yet could not set down.

Her bag, with barely any books, hung from her shoulder, but somehow it felt heavier than a gas cylinder. She hardly noticed the whispers of her friends behind her. Not a single tear fell. She hurried down the dusty road, where her *mamamama* waited to take her home, wishing the path stretched on forever, slow enough to swallow time itself.

She remembered how Anita used to carry her heavy bag, her hands steady and warm,

murmuring encouragement even when tired. A whirlwind of emotions bamboozled her mind. She didn't dare ask why, or how, or what it truly meant that her mother was "no more." She had been just there yesterday, lying on her bed with tears of joy spilling from her eyes, telling Maya that life was beautiful because of the moments they shared. How could someone so alive vanish in a heartbeat? She knew Anita was sick but she didn't know that death follows sickness.

"*Maa*, where is mummy? They said she is no more. Why are you crying? Where's dad?" Maya's questions tumbled over one another, too many to catch, too many to answer. Her grandmother held her tightly, trying not to faint at the sight of her granddaughter's silent disbelief.

"There's no time to create a fuss here. Anil, take her to Pashupati before they cremate her. Let her see her mother. Don't be cruel to this child," Maya's aunt shouted from the kitchen.

Maya hurried to change. She put on the green *kurtha* her mother had sewn for her, a soft pajama, and the only pair of slippers she could find and departed to visit her "dead" mother. Her fingers trembled as she crossed them and held her breath, praying that "no more" meant something else, anything but death. She imagined she could still explain the weirdness of her day to her mother: the half-day leave from school, the abrupt goodbye to friends, the hurried walk along the dusty streets.

"My mother never allowed me a half day leave. Why is she no more? Was departure important for her that she made me do something she hated?" Maya couldn't accept that Ani was gone. A hollow pressed against her chest, and abnegation slowly filled it.

It was a quiet evening for everyone but Maya. The sun was ready to invite dusk, slowly hiding behind the hills spreading its last golden rays to the Bagmati's rebellious water. Plastic bags, abandoned clothes, directionless flowers and toxic residues drifted along the current, catching the light and shining as if they, too, belonged to the river. And among them lay Anita's body: pale, covered in a white cloth. Cotton blocked her nostrils, and flowers were scattered around her as if her body had suddenly metamorphosed into a deity.

A deity, Maya thought, should still move. But Anita was sleeping, not moving, not even a finger. Butterflies hovered, indifferent, while houseflies swarmed lazily, a small, buzzing chorus to the stillness.

Dinesh ran and hugged her. He wept like an owl. She didn't dare to ask him why; she already knew. Ani was no more. Her Ani, who loved her selflessly. Her Ani, who would scream at a dog if it barked at Maya. Her Ani, who would wrap her under her shawl and feed her milk on a bus if Maya was too hungry. Her Ani, who would learn recipes for her. Her Ani, who would try to do a fancy braid on her short hair. Her Ani, she was gone, forever. Maya used to cry even if her mother disappeared for even an hour. Now, she didn't know

how long she would cry, and her tears would only meet absence and silence, never Ani's hug.

The Bagmati carried everything: the refuse, the flowers, the sun's dying light and now, her grief. Grief, once it enters your body, refuses to leave. And a human with no grief has never truly lived.

*You may spend the day believing
time stitched your wound with flowers,
it rinsed your sorrow from your bones,
you could finally dance in the sunlight
the hole inside of you finally filled*

*But when night gathers you in bed
with one sock on your foot and the other lost
grief drapes you like a warm blanket
like it never left*

*A silhouette stands in front you
murmuring that happiness
was only ever a passing light
grief never had you
but you consumed grief like you always had it*

Maya was lucky or perhaps cursed to have a life that revealed its fragility so early. And the life she envisioned, full of laughter and small rebellions, ended before it could begin. She wept quietly as Ani dissolved into ashes then softly flowed with Bagmati.

Watching Anita sleep before they cremated her felt, to Maya, like witnessing her die twice. Hunger still came to her body, but no one asked if she wanted to eat anymore. She remembered the exact time *Diya Aur Baati Hummand Ishqbaaz* played on television, yet Ani was no longer there beside her, their shoulders scrunched together on the same sofa.

Everywhere, Ani's voice seemed to shimmer in the air. Her photograph watched Maya from the dressing table in the living room, but there were no signs of her soul lingering inside it. Maya felt disoriented, as if the world had shifted slightly out of place and forgotten to tell her.

Ever since Ani got dissolved into the dark Bagmati, Maya despised it. The river had taken her mother; that was all she understood. Anita had to taste Bagmati, and Maya could still feel her hands tremble for it was her hand that fed her Bagmati's water.

Maya could still feel the eerie air from the day of the cremation clinging to her skin. The air was mixed with the smell of incense drifting from the temples, foul smoke from the unknown body being cremated nearby (Maya didn't mind it, she could feel how the woman

with a white *saree* and broken bangles was feeling when she stood beside another pyre and said, "*malai laiija prabhu*") and the putrid smell of the river. Bagmati unsettled her in every way possible. Flowers floated beside filth, prayers tangled with waste, flowers tucked inside a used condom, divinity and lust merging in the same current. Maya hated the sight of it, its defeatist aura sucked the joviality out of her soul, as if the current herself pulled away the songs she carved in her chest.

It disgusted her not because of the filth but because of how Bagmati swallowed everything without discrimination: love, loss, devotion, neglect. In the quiet lap of the Bagmati lay Maya's Ani, dying. The river that promised a gentle passage to heaven now held a reality far harsher than Maya had imagined. Ani's final rest seemed anything but peaceful. Bagmati felt like a dead poet whose euphonious poem once revived the dead upon the pyre. Now, if its poetry was hummed, the dead would only die twice.

A month had passed since Ani's death. Dinesh spent his days running errands, moving between home to Pashupati, performing endless rituals to settle Ani's soul to peace. And when Maya finally had the chance to speak to him, he sealed himself in silence.

She began to resent her dad. He never explained why Ani was "no more." The words felt unfinished, like a sentence missing its ending.

A visual kept on flashing her mind.

"Baba, what if mom went to mamaghar forever?" Maya had once asked playfully, teasing him because he always made a dramatic fuss whenever Ani visited her mother's house. He could never stay away from her for long.

"Oh dear, I will go to your mamaghar and snatch our mom back to us", he had laughed. "I will never let her leave. I have my own tricks, Maya."

"Like when you faked your sickness so that we couldn't go and enjoy *jatra* there?"

"Hehe! Keep it a secret, *Kali*."

The memory stung now.

Tears filled her eyes—not only out of sadness but anger. She kept on asking him why he hadn't tried to save Ani. Why had he called her to burn her own mother instead. How painful must it have been for Anita to endure in her final moments.

But Dinesh gave her no answers.

Instead, he just played his favorite song by Lata Mangeshkar "*Pankh Hote Toh Ud Aati*." The melody drifted through the house while he avoided her eyes.

To Maya, his silence answered just one thing: "I don't care."

The song filled the room like the smoke of a ghat. Maya relived the moment. The softness of Lata's voice, the yearning in lyrics, it felt dishonest. How could music still exist and not Ani's voice? There's no "*Chhori*, the dinner is ready" neither there is "Baby, what shall I make for your tiffin?". It had been a week since Maya resumed her school and she had been

eating *Wai-wai* every day.

Dinesh closed his eyes as the song played. As if the memories were kinder than a conversation. Maya—with tears—watched his face and felt something unfamiliar grow inside her. Not just sadness, hatred and anger.

Bagmati flowed the same way in the city. Silent, uninterrupted and unbothered. Each time anyone asked Maya to join her father in a ritual, she refused. Bagmati petrified her. Pashupati never became a temple to her. It was just a *ghat*, where Maya cremated her mother. Ani had Maya but Maya could never have her.

It exasperated her how everything continued. While she struggled to remember Ani's face, her father donated Ani's last picture to their Brahmin. The neighbors still laughed in the morning, vendors still bargained over price of onions and temple bells still rang as if the god had not taken everything from her. Even Bagmati, which swallowed Ani's ashes, moved forward without any hesitation.

Bagmati didn't feel innocent anymore. It knew too much to remain pure. It watched daughters burn their mothers, watched women dissolve into smoke while men spoke of duty and liberation, and still opened its arms without protest. It forgave too easily. It accepted everything, the ashes, prayers, sins, plastics, filth, as if nothing demands accountability.

Its forgiveness felt too cruel.

A year passed since Anita was dissolved into the Earth. Her final rituals were concluded. Maya went to her mamaghar with Dinesh. While she sat quietly in the corner, Nanimaiya, Ani's mother, gently urged Dinesh to remarry. Maya did not fully understand the conversation, but she could grasp the futility of her presence in that room as if she was a guest in her own life. She could not question her grandmother, nor could she challenge her father.

"What sin must I have committed in my past life, *Jwai*," Nanimaiya sobbed, staring at the framed photograph of Narayan, her late husband, "that I had to lose both my husband and my daughter one after another?"

She wiped her tears and continued, "All I have left of Anita is Maya. I don't want her to grow up without a mother. Find someone responsible and marry again soon. It will help her to have someone who can cook her warm meals and braid her hair. You are only thirty-six. You don't need to spend your youth wrapped in loneliness. Think practically. Think about your future."

After a pause, she added softly, "No one can ever replace Ani."

Her voice trembled as she went on. "I could never give Anita the care she deserved. I was always occupied—cooking for the household, washing clothes, working late in the fields, and repeating the same chores every day. I never had the time for those small mother-daughter conversations. I could not nurture the things she loved. Yet she grew up to be such a good child. She went to school, learned to braid her own hair, built her own skills

and achievements. She always helped me. But I was never present enough to celebrate her.”

Tears streamed down her face.

“Now that I am older, now that the burdens have lightened and I finally have the time to adore my daughter, she is gone. I don’t want Maya to live a life that mirrors Anita’s. She deserves love and more than that, she deserves humanity.”

Maya understood enough to feel herself being discussed like a fragile object passed between hands as if she wasn’t a child but an inheritance. Still, she tried to make sense of her grandmother’s worry. But she was certain that her father would never even think about replacing Ani.

Then, in a single sentence, that certainty shattered; like the dry thatch her grandmother used to break apart to feed the cows.

“I have thought about it,” Dinesh said quietly. “If this is what you believe is right, I am ready to marry this girl. Her name is Muna.”

The words did not echo; they collided.

Maya felt as though she were standing in the middle of traffic, vehicles rushing past her, horns blaring, everyone demanding she move aside. The traffic lights seemed permanently broken, flashing no red, no green – only confusion. There were rules for crossing streets, but none for surviving this moment. No signal to protect her. No pause long enough to breathe.

She was utterly disheartened. It had only been a year since Ani’s death and on her death anniversary, instead of remembering her, they had chosen to rewrite their own destiny.

“They could have waited,” she thought bitterly, “Just a few more days.”

The timing felt merciless, as if grief had a calendar and they had chosen to erase its date. On a day that should have belonged to memory and mourning, they were arranging beginnings. If it were up to Maya, she would have never imagined replacing Ani. She would have engraved her memory into her soul and carried it forward—living with the love, the warmth and even the ache if that meant she would not have to abandon her mother for some Muna.

“What a cruel time to be alive,” she thought. When endings were still fresh, and yet the world insisted on moving forward like Bagmati. To Maya, grief wasn’t something that could be substituted. It flows in our bloodstream and paints its colors inside our organs. These elements of our life should be guarded. And she would have chosen the pain of reminiscence over the betrayal of moving on.

But that’s not how the world revolves. It doesn’t have blood. It has rivers and it’s meant to flow.

Despite promising herself she would never return, Maya found her steps leading her back to the Bagmati. She had sworn she would never look at its trailing current again, never stand by the water that had swallowed Ani. Yet there she was.

Bagmati looked visceral as if it remembered Maya's face, her moles and her innocence as though it too carried her memory.

The first time she had stood there, it had marked the end of her joy. This time, standing before the same restless water, she felt it marking another beginning, not hers, but her father's.

Everyone had gathered with bright faces and rehearsed smiles. They showered Dinesh with blessings, wishing him love and happiness. Maya stood among them like a misplaced shadow—an outcast at her own father's wedding. No one thought to wish her anything.

Quietly, she drifted apart from the crowd and walked toward the banks of Bagmati—the same place where she had embraced her mother for the last time. The river shimmered under the light and reeked upon breathing, and for a fleeting moment she felt her old effervescence return, as if Ani were standing beside her, consoling with a kiss that love did not end with her death.

Behind her, the rituals began. Applause rippled through the gathering as *Ganesh Puja* concluded. Laughter rose when Muna placed the garland around Dinesh's neck during the *Jamaila*. The air filled with celebration.

And when Dinesh lifted the vermilion and drew it across Muna's hairline, sealing the marriage, Maya wept into the restless sound of Bagmati, as if she were burning her mother all over again.

She couldn't understand why the lady she witnessed crying over her husband's death a year ago was still standing there with a white saree, broken bangles and empty hairline with no *sindoor*. A thought struck Maya's mind. "Had she loved her husband so deeply that even after a year she carried the same sorrow, her life wrapped in widowhood—or was it the weight of a world that expected her to remain so?" Or "had Dinesh not loved Ani at all that he's here playing holi with Muna's head after just a year as if grief had an expiry date written while it's born—*only for a year?*"

Her white saree had outlived the mourning—as if grief itself had become her clothing that Dinesh was never asked to wear.

Maya tried to question this peculiarity.

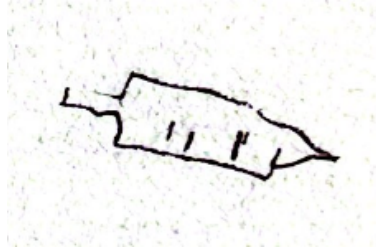
Bagmati didn't answer.

Bagmati kept on flowing. With no answers. Because its holiness, from where prayers were heard and gods were held accountable, was swept away by the sins—of these humans.

The river carried offerings and offences alike, never pausing to distinguish between them. One by one, sinners arrived. One by one, they left. The water remembered everything, and explained nothing.

When the River Left

Junil Maharjan



They say there was a river here once. But the only evidence of a river was the dried up veins in some places. Most of the valley was covered with sand, old crumbling buildings jutting out like half-buried bodies. The sun shone brightly, punishing everything and everyone under the sky.

A lone figure with shabby clothes stood on top of a dune. His trousers had been patched more times than his age. A makeshift belt held them to his waist along with a knife he had made himself and a canteen of water for the journey. He carried an empty plastic jar in his hands.

He looked at the sand and smiled, remembering the stories his mother used to tell about a vast land with green trees and flowing water, of gods that roamed the valley and the ghosts that still haunt the dunes looking for the river. He had never seen a tree or a river, and the gods had long abandoned this place.

“The river washed away the sins and carried the souls to heaven,” his mother used to say, “but the sinners became so numerous that the river couldn’t wash away their sins anymore.”

The warm wind blew past him. He needed to rush, he did not want to be here after sunset. He walked past the remains of an old bridge, jutting out like broken prongs of a trident.

“It was to be huge and lots of vehicles crossed it every day,” his mother had told him. When he asked what a car was, she showed him the rusted, metal boxes on the bridge. That was the first time he had travelled with his mother to these parts.

“So the cars ran fast and got flung to the other side?” he had asked and his mother had laughed heartily.

“The bridge connected two big cities,” his mother continued, “and went over the river. The part you are seeing is only the half.”

He smiled at the memory and looked at the hill with old temples and abandoned houses at a distance. He moved without pause, keeping his memories at the back of his mind. As the hill came closer, he could see the dangling windows, rusted metal signage, their words lost to time. The houses and temples were in shambles. Everywhere he had been, it all looked the same. Most of the houses had probably been looted. Maybe he would look into them once he finished what he came for. It was dangerous to venture into these houses, but sometimes he could find a few things that would be worth the risk.

A small rodent ran past him. Food, he thought. He needed to set up a trap. He quickly tore strings made of old clothes and dug a shallow hole, tied a stone to the end. Not a good trap, but this would have to do. He would check the trap while returning home.

He walked once again towards the hill, past the houses that were half-eaten, abandoned after the great flood. The river rose once and then never returned, only to be slowly swallowed by the sand. Eventually, everything would be turned to sand and dust. He shook his head and did not stop.

The walk up the hill was not steep. He called it a hill only because it was a little higher than the rest of the dunes. He walked up the sandy path until there was firm ground where the sand had not swallowed most of the land. A little further, he reached a dome with a broken protrusion, its pinnacle flat on the sand. A stupa, as told by his mother.

Not far now, he thought. He started counting his steps, like his mother used to do when they reached this place. A hundred steps took him to the remains of a huge temple. Most of the upper part had already fallen, but the base and a rock at its center still stood. His mother had always bowed to the rock but had never gone up to the center of the temple and he had never dared to ask her why. Just past the temple, he could make the depression on the ground where the stone tap was. Stone steps laid a long time ago took him down to the source of all life, trickling without waiting for anyone.

A woman in tattered clothes and a scarf was filling a plastic jar. Green algae around the bottom edges covered the jar and the trickling water had filled half of it. He looked at the jar he had been dragging through the sand. Very similar. He looked at her face. Her eyes were wide, her face tight, looking at him without blinking and checking his every move. She had one hand across her waist, elbow angled outward. He knew what she had there.

He had not seen a human for quite some time. A scar on his right arm gave a sharp tingle - a gift from his previous encounter. He could see a similar scar on her arm. He tried to give her a friendly smile but it felt forced. He showed her the plastic jar in his hand. She let her muscles relax but did not remove her hand.

He stood at the top of the steps that went down to the stone tap, watching her and the water trickling into the jar, slow and stubborn, each drop sounding louder than it should. Sweat ran down his back, salty enough to sting but he waited until it was full. He beckoned

his head towards the tap. She glanced at the container and then back at him. Slowly, she stepped toward it. He moved aside. She lifted it and hurried up the steps, almost stumbling, but she caught herself and walked off without looking at him.

He went down and washed his face and drank for a long time. The water tasted old and rusty. He placed his jar under the trickling water. He felt alone in this dead city. He looked at the water and thought of the journey back. He still had to walk half a day. His feet were already heavy, but ready to lift the jar.

Coughing has Replaced the Wailing Baby

Manushree Mahat



I can't feel my body anymore, Shree. I just can't. The words had rung in her head incessantly after the first few months. Now, it was like a dull ache in her body—thumping like a mantra in her mind.

She had married at just twenty-four. She hung on to the age because she had attached herself to the image of herself unmarried and smoking packs of cigarettes in a lonely home—untethered and unbothered. It was not that she was dispassionate about love and romance—in fact she had had quite a few relationships to speak for, but she was a realist. Satisfaction could be found more easily when you can succumb to the idea that you might never find a companion, or love.

“I can't fit you into a canvas. There's so much of you that I don't think I could ever paint you in one,” he had told her one day, with a look of awe and disappointment.

She had met him on a Thursday hike. He was a romantic and older, she was a realist and younger. Somehow, they made sense together.

“You could always make a mural for me. Paint me on every wall of the city to show your profound love,” she had joked.

She knew he had taken her seriously though. It was perhaps life's greatest irony that she had ended up falling for a man who dwelled on the smallest thing. He birthed art everyday, while she more often than not found it harder to glean the nuances of artwork than climbing Sagarmatha.

He liked that she was realist, and she liked that he was a romantic. They filled out the spaces between them without losing themselves.

Now there was an empty space where he used to be.

And now here she was, risking everything to save what he had left of him.

The mildest thought about giving up was met with her mind playing a montage of the alternative that would befall her. She stifled the onslaught of sickness boxing in her throat and kept on walking through bodies.

Don't look down. If you do, it becomes real.

The ground was dry and hard underneath her boots. Her stomach still ached, but she could handle that—she had walked through rocky, cavernous, and muddy terrain her whole life, so this was like travelling on even ground for her. No, the problem was the occasional bump she met with flesh— at best she heard the sound of bones cracking, at worst the squashing of a decaying, porous body.

Ever since people started dying by the millions in the city, the government had been trying to come up with ways to tackle the ‘illness’. Of course, most of the government was immune to the ‘illness’ somehow—perhaps being in politics had blackened their immune system with a lack of morality and humanity, rendering the disease useless to them. Selling their souls to the devils had shielded them from their wrath.

Or, it may just be that they had the backing of the country’s entire health department. But that was certainly not poetic enough.

The Bagmati was reeking of the bodies lining every inch of its shore. That was currently where she was traversing through, poking. She poked through every inch of its viable ground to search for some semblance of water. That was much easier said than done, however. The Bagmati had dried up years ago, much like how the depraved inhabitants of its city were drying up by the hundreds every day.

She had seen pictures of the Bagmati before when it was still flowing with the hues of light blue—its current carrying the strength of a powerful force. One could feel the liveliness of its waves and its aquatic inhabitants in those scenic pictures she had found in her grandfather’s albums. Her grandfather was there, young and muddy from catching a fish with his friends from the Bagmati to sell it for 2 rupees in the nearest market. In another picture, he and his friends could be found blithely swimming as the hot sun reflected its warm rays into the water. The people had given life to that majestic river by living with its beauty without polluting it, and the Bagmati had given the same love back to them. Deep blue and mighty—that is what the Bagmati had been.

Incidentally, that was also when she had seen the biggest smile on her grandfather’s face.

In the last ten years that it took for the Bagmati to dry up, one couldn’t imagine swimming in its grey matter. The fishes too, were long gone, replaced by floating pieces of garbage—juice boxes, plastic, empty bottles of cheap alcohol—you could find everything but a sign of life in the river. When she was in her mid-teens, one of her friends had splashed her face with a mug of water from the Bagmati, and she had screeched so hard that she had

scared a horde of street dogs away. By the end of the day she had still been rubbing her face to eliminate any traces of the dirty Bagmati.

Twenty years later, here she was, scavenging for water remains, walking over dead bodies amidst the same Bagmati, whose stench was now mixed with the stench of decay. In its death it was now a cradle to the same humans who had caused it—one grave on top of another.

It didn't matter to the government that Bagmati was drying up as the years went by. Politicians strode in with curbing climate change as their campaign slogan, and then abandoned said campaign goals, because 'other issues were of more importance'. They remained steadfast in their resolve to not care, until there was no coming back.

The illness had started with pollution unlike anything seen anywhere before. The city's AQI had been wracking up by the day as if someone had punched too hard on an arcade boxing machine. One day it skyrocketed so much that the city was entirely covered in smog so dense that one couldn't even see the skies or the buildings anymore. People began coughing, gently at first, then with such violence that doctors began worrying that they would start coughing their lungs out. Droplets of saliva turned into an avalanche of blood, and the hospitals began overcrowding with hunched up patients, who had to hold on to walls to keep their organs from splitting from the pain.

Soon, the emergency room began emptying out, and the morgue started filling up.

Medical professionals had started realizing that they couldn't control the death count. They could momentarily reduce the cough by their usual combination of cold medication, but the violence of the ailment meant that the patients simply died from their organs giving out on them. It was a painful way to go. She had a vivid firsthand recollection from his last moments.

That was when people and societies started scrambling away from fear. They began running away to nearest districts, or if they could, they left to new countries entirely. Of course, other places were no better. Maldives, as they knew it, was halfway down the Indian ocean, swallowed wholly into its angry chasm of nature. India was experiencing a significant migration problem, as West Bengal had practically been flooded away. Other places like Assam and Bihar shared similar fates. Nepal was on its own.

That is when the scientists and specialists made a rather startling discovery. After scraping away at the remains of the dead, they'd found the combination of pollutants that was causing the illness had been the results of over a century's worth of pollution. As viruses can only be dealt with a sample of the virus itself, they needed a sample of the past century.

And the only river that had stored that much pollution was the Bagmati.

Bagmati, who had suffered the worst brunt of human neglect—from being a collector of biological sewage, to ashes of remains—she had swallowed everything until she could only take so much abuse to her patience and dignity. As temperature wracked up, alongside the

wrath of the goddess she was sure looked over Bagmati, the river had slowly dried up. She had given up on humans, from being abandoned to abandoning. She had come full circle.

And now, she bore the burden of saving them all. They, who had caused her death first.

After the discovery had come to light, everybody began crowding around the Bagmati, looking for any leftover water. For days, they scavenged every little crevice they could find around the river, for any semblance of a puddle that can be used for the cure. The professionals came with their tools to extract water from the ground, believing that certainly a sample of the water could be found somewhere if they looked hard enough.

But people were soon to realize that the supernatural did exist after all, as they couldn't possibly make this new discovery through any scientific means. Based on logic and reason, the ground underneath the Bagmati is supposed to hold the remains of the river—after all, it had flowed from time immemorial. However, profuse digging and scavenging only revealed dry remains—no sign of the mighty river that once flowed—as if it never existed at all.

Once upon a time, the Bagmati had held such spiritual prowess that people believed that drinking from the river would cure them of any ailment. Perhaps reality and myths are meant to collide always, and that is the only way humanity can learn its lesson. Maybe this was divine intervention—an ironic joke from the gods for its ungrateful subjects, that they had created stories around the Bagmati only to denigrate its holiness. Now when the people needed Bagmati, the river had nothing to give them back.

The mere fact that she was dwelling on these otherworldly musings exhibited her peculiar state of mind. Death and birth had turned her into a believer, and she was ready to hold on to any god if it could give her hope for a better future for them.

She knew it was stupid—that what the government couldn't find, how could she? But she was ready to dig through the entire dry flats of the Bagmati if it meant it could save him.

It had been three days since she had begun searching for water. Perhaps Bagmati would be kinder to a woman who was desperate to save the life of a loved one. She wanted to believe in miracles, she wanted to hold on to the otherworldly because there were more important things to her now than her cynicism.

She had to find the water, she had to find a cure now, because she had to save the minuscule life she had birthed—one who had been coughing, instead of crying since his birth.

Offered to the River

Sofiya Maharjan



I was a part of nature, a homegrown flower. I had always believed I must have had some purpose to exist in this world. I was cared for in a beautiful flower pot, placed where the sunlight reached me just right. Every morning, warmth settled on my petals, and every evening, I rested in the cool shade. Gently, clear water was poured over me, soaking into my roots, keeping me fresh and alive. Every day, I bid goodbye to a friend. One by one, they were plucked and taken for their own higher reason. I used to wonder what that purpose felt like. Was it painful? Was it fulfilling? That day, it was my turn.

I was chosen to be offered to Lord Ganesha. For a moment, I felt proud. This was what I had been waiting for, wasn't it? But when they broke me from my roots, a sharp sting ran through me. It was quick, but it stayed. I was placed with love and devotion on the idol's head. Hands folded, prayers whispered, I felt important, almost sacred. But within seconds, I slipped, pushed aside, and fell to the ground.

I was not the only one.

Around me were dozens of flowers, bright, fading, crushed. After a while, a priest swept us all together without a glance and tossed us into the Bagmati River near Sankhamul. I had heard stories of this river. Sacred, they said. Pure. But the moment I touched the water, I knew something was wrong. It stank. A thick, sour smell clung to everything. The water was not clear; it was dark, almost charcoal black, heavy, and slow. This was nothing like the clean water that once nourished me. That water had felt alive. This felt tired.

I floated, unsure of where I was being taken. I was not alone. Around me drifted plastic bottles, noodle wrappers, torn cloth, branches, leaves, some freshly discarded, others half-decayed, dissolving into the same dark current. They bumped into me, clung to me, pulled me along.

Every time I passed beneath a bridge, I saw people above. Some paused. Some didn't.

Many threw things down: bags, waste, things they no longer needed. It felt like I was gathering companions, but the river did not welcome any of us. It endured us. And I could feel it, the river had numbed itself. Whatever pain it once held, it had learned to carry silently.

As I drifted further, I passed a temple along the bank. More flowers were thrown in, just like me. Fresh ones, still fragrant. For a moment, I felt less alone. But they too quickly lost their brightness, swallowed by the same water. Along with them came other offerings: incense remains, food, and ashes. Devotion turned into a burden. People came to wash their sins away in this river. But they washed everything else away, too, their waste, their neglect, their carelessness. How easily they let go of things here. How easily they believed the river would take it all.

The current grew stronger as I moved past UN Park. The banks looked greener here. People ran along the paths. Children laughed and played. Life seemed normal. Yet beside them, I floated with the debris.

No one looked closely. Maybe they couldn't reach the river from there. Maybe it was easier not to see. Bright plastics drifted with me, blue, pink, black, some still sealed, others hollow and useless. They moved differently from me. They did not soften. They did not change.

Dogs wandered along the banks, sniffing, searching. One came close to the water, staring. Others gathered, circling something caught among the waste. They began to howl. Only then did I understand. Among the debris lay the body of one of their own. It had been thrown away as if it meant nothing. But the way they cried, the way they lingered, it meant everything. Not just to them, but to the river that held it.

I drifted on, slower now. At one point, I became trapped between layers of waste. Plastic pressed against my petals. The water barely moved. I could hear voices nearby, people talking about how this river once held fish, how it used to be clear.

I tried to imagine it. A river where something could live. A river that could breathe. But I saw nothing. No movement beneath the surface. No life. Only stillness.

I began to change, too. My petals, once soft and full, started to weaken. Edges curled inward. My color faded, slowly blending into the dullness around me. I was no longer what I had been.

And neither was the river.

Further ahead, something unusual appeared. From a pipe in the wall, thick yellowish water poured continuously into the river. When it touched me, I felt it immediately heavier, harsher. This was not water meant for life. It was a waste. Untreated sewage from nearby homes and settlements is something discarded without thought, yet endlessly returned. It did not pass through. It settled.

It settled on me.

On my petals.

Inside the folds of what I once was. Under the harsh sun, I did not simply fade; I began to wither. Slowly, almost deliberately. My petals curled inward, tightening like fabric left too long in the heat. Their softness stiffened. Their edges darkened. The color that once held light began to absorb everything around it, grey, black, yellow, until it was no longer mine.

I could feel myself becoming surface. Not a flower anymore, but something caught pressed between plastic, threadlike roots, torn wrappers, silt. Held in place like an object in a frame I never chose.

Layer over layer gathered.

A bottle leaned against me.

A strip of cloth tangled beneath me.

A film of oil sealed the water above me, catching the sunlight I could no longer feel.

Nothing moved freely.

Everything stayed.

I remembered the clean water that once passed through me, the way it nourished without leaving a trace. Here, nothing is left without leaving something behind.

Not even me.

And the Bagmati River, once spoken of as flowing, now felt like this too: not a river, but a slow accumulation. A body holding what it could not release. Not suddenly.

But layer by layer.

Offering by offering.

Waste by waste.

Until movement became memory. As I withered further, I did not disappear. I remained flattened, darkened, embedded into everything around me.

I did not drift anymore.

I stayed where I was, caught between plastic and silt, my petals pressed and heavy. The water of the Bagmati River moved around me, but I could not move with it.

Slowly, I kept withering. My edges tightened, my color fading into the same dullness that surrounded me. What once made me stand out no longer did. I was becoming part of it, not by choice, but because there was nowhere else to go. The river did not feel like it was flowing anymore. It felt like it was holding everything that was thrown into it, everything that stayed behind. Sometimes the water shifted just enough for a bit of light to reach me. For a moment, I remembered what it felt like to be fresh, to be cared for.

But it never lasted.

Everything here stayed too long. And so did I. Like me, the river carried more than

it should have. Like me, it could not let go. I withered quietly within it, not taken away, not returned, just left there as the Bagmati River went on, as if it were still a river, while everything inside it forgot how to leave.

For Every Year

Anju Tamang



“Why are you crying, my baby?” She whispers faintly.

“I don’t know. I can’t help myself from crying over you lately. Is it because I have grown old, and become a crybaby? I have become helpless, hopeless and tired,” sobs Yajju, and lets her tears flow down on her wrinkled cheeks.

She is sitting on a step of a staircase leading to the Bagmati. The sun is not in the sky, yet its presence is stronger in summer dusk—a warm, dry breeze keeps hitting her face. She looks at the river, but nothing like riverness is there. Only mountains of plastics: wrappers, bottles, polythene bags, and other wastes are struggling to float on a charcoal-like sticky liquid with the foulest stench that one can ever imagine. Yajju can only sigh and sometimes curse to everyone in her dire desperation, murmuring to herself. “Don’t do that. People call you mad when you do that. Stop it,” Bagmati Maju tries to calm Yaju down. “How can I stop cursing them? Look at you! Look at your condition! What have they done to you? Last month I went to the ward office to talk with the chairperson, but they pushed me out of the building. They are the real crazy ones for giving permission to establish a dyeing factory without any proper waste management. They don’t care about you. I can’t do anything, but only curse them to feel chills in their spine.” She makes fists, and clenches her jaws together. “There is nothing that you can do. So don’t give trouble to yourself. Stop worrying about me. Look at yourself, you are also weak, no longer a maiden. When are you going to grow up and stop crying like a child? Do you remember our first meeting when you were a child”

A group of young boys were playing in the river turn-wise; doing backflips, giggling and swimming. Their only way to beat the summer heat was to swim in the clean Bagmati without being worried about school, as it was session break for them. The lush green bushes and trees near the river were a safe place to hang their bhoto and suruwal. None came to the

river to disturb them there. Their parents were busy working in the farm and taking care of cattle in their sheds. Grandfathers were under the peepal tree playing Bagh-chaal- and chatting. Grandmothers were looking after the grains put out on the porch for sun basking. Other young girls were playing there under the surveillance of the elders while a gang of boys were in the river. “Yajju, khyah-gu the ma (don’t dive in the river). There are only boys here, why don’t you go to the village and play with other girls?” suggested Prakash, her six months old cousin. “I’m tired of their play. I will just dip my leg in this cool water, and do nothing. Let me stay here, Prakash.” Other boys shouted, “Go away. Don’t come near us. Your parents will scold us later in the evening for bringing you here. What’s this girl’s problem? Why is she so clingy? Go away.” Yajju glared at them and walked along the river bank. She stood four hundred meters away from them, and sat on a rock in the river. She started to cry. “They don’t want me to play with them because I am a girl. They always tell me to play with other girls but I am bored of their game. They think that I will just return to the village if they scold me, but I just want to feel the coolness of this river,” she murmured to herself, finding a comfortable rock to sit on. “The water is so cool and clean here. The sand is so white and sparkling here. Last time, Prakash and his friends caught beautiful fish there. I wonder what other things are there in this river! This cool breeze!”

“Are you still sad, my child?” a female voice came. Yajju was startled and looked around her, but she saw no-one. She was petrified and remembered ghost stories related to the place. “But my maa told me that kichkanyas appear only at night. How can I hear the voice in this broad daylight?” she whispered. “Who is there? Prakash, is that you? Please, don’t make such jokes, you know I can’t handle these things,” she shouted. “Ha. Ha. Ha. I am not kichkanya, not any khyak or any evil form my daughter. I am the river, Bagmati Ajima.”

“Stop fooling me around. How can a river talk? It’s impossible. You are lying.”

“Why shall I lie to you? I think your mother has told you the tales of Manjushree and how he sent the nagas of Kathmandu to Taudaha after he chopped the lake off as a negotiation with Karkota, the naga king. And there are many other such tales. In the same way, I am Bagmati Ajima, the mother river of Kathmandu valley. I don’t harm anyone as all humans are my children. I protect every being in me and around me. Look at the ghat, I accept the souls of the dead people, and guide them to heaven. So, don’t get scared, my child.”

“How can you understand my language, ajima? How do you know the Newa language?” Yajju was confused, as her fear left. “I understand all languages, but only a few can understand me. Like your friends swimming over there. I tried to talk with every human who comes near me, but only a few have heard and understood me so far. And you are one of them, my child. Once, I tried to talk to Mani, your friend; he heard me but he was so scared that he ran.”

“He is not my friend, he doesn’t like me. I didn’t run, because I liked your voice and I wanted someone to talk to.”

“Maybe that’s why you understood me.”

“Can I call you Bagmati maa, and come to you anytime I need anyone to talk?” “Sure, you do. I haven’t had anyone to talk to these days. I had quite a lot in the past; saints and sages would come to me and talk to me for hours many years ago, I don’t remember how long it has been. So after a long time, you are the one whom I am talking to, though I tried to talk with countless people here on the bank. Maybe, slowly humans have lost the ability to hear and understand me. I would love to talk to you. And you must keep it a secret.” “Lakha vahya I swear.”

Yajju tries to hide her tears this time as she doesn’t want to upset her ailing maa. Swarnim comes there, searching for his mother. He sees her at her usual place, and like usual speaking in the language that he never understands, and she never tries to explain. “Maa, na gyah khah, gwa (mom, you must be cold, let’s go)”. She looks at the direction of the voice, and sees her son smiling at her. He is in his office uniform, white shirt, grey pants with black leather belt around his waist, is carrying a bag on one shoulder, tired but smiling for his mother. He hasn’t gone home to change, she knows. She struggles to get up, and Swornim holds her wrinkled weak left hand. With right hand on her right knee, she stands and stares at the river. He senses a secret being exchanged there for a moment.

Her baa had had a heart attack on that day, when he saw Yajju standing at the door with her luggage, alone. “Khya, kay khya (daughter, what happened)?” Mother gasped. “Why do you have all your belongings with you? Where is Ganesh? Did he come to see you off?” “Mom, please don’t tell me to go back. I just want to be here with you both.” Her father came nearer to her, “What’s going on? Why are you here to live with us? Our son-in-law says he likes you, but what happened?” He asked calmly. She never heard her father raising voice to her. She knew that she was her dad’s girl. Everyone in her community and relations told her that her father gave her name Yajju, as she was the dearest one for him, his only child, his darling, his beloved, his everything. They couldn’t bear another child after or before her, so she held their lives. Her father never scolded her, and never tried to control her. He let her live her life freely. He would suggest she go to school and at least have some education, but she found it lifeless, and he did nothing. When they were searching for a suitable groom for her, they wanted someone to stay with them even after the marriage. But, they couldn’t find anyone like that in their community. Their daughter liked spending time in nature more than doing household chores. She didn’t care about any relationship as she had a platonic one with her ajima. However, due to the pressure from their community, they had to marry her off when she was in her early twenties to Ganesh Maharjan. Unlike them, Ganesh held a government job at Sinha Durbar as a herbalist. His house was roughly

3 kilometers away from theirs, a sense of security to nervous parents. They spent all of their savings for marriage and the dowry for her as a compensation for not teaching her chores. Ganesh seemed to be a fine person with a kind heart. However, his parents couldn't be kind to her when she couldn't give birth. "Is that the reason, Yajju?" asked the mother. Yajju said with tears in her eyes, "I don't want to live with them, I want to spend my life with you. He is going to marry another girl this upcoming Thursday. He told me to stay there and live together with the second wife as sisters. But, how can I share my husband? His parents wanted me to be gone, though they didn't express anything. But, I am not stupid for not understanding it. I made it easy for him. So, please, let me live with you." "It's okay my child, it's okay. Don't worry. We will not send you away." All of them cried together in each other's arms. But, at night her father's chest pained so much that he couldn't breathe in the bedroom. He stopped the mother from shouting for help outside, thus he let himself suffer in silence having only wife by his side.

Yajju, with her son, shifted to the northeastern region of Kathmandu district ten years ago. She has become fond of this area surrounded by trees, but more importantly, it has a more tolerable sight of Bagmati than her ancestral home, where the river has turned into the city's sewage system linked by pipelines from all the buildings. She cut off all ties with her relatives when she left her husband's house, and decided not to marry. Her decision had stirred disgust and disbelief among her relatives. She was asked not to participate in any celebrations or festivity as she brought bad luck, a request that she gladly accepted; she never had any connection to them anyway. So this home gives her peace. One night while sleeping, she suddenly can't breathe properly. She calls her son. She knows that she won't survive this time from her disease, so she doesn't struggle much. Swarnim, her only supporter, is keeping her head on his lap, gently patting. "Let me take you to the hospital," he requests with teary eyes. "No need. You know what to do if I die." He nods. He can't do anything against her decision because he knows his limitation of being her 'son.'

Yajju started to support her mother with the farm after her father's death. She was in her mid-thirties when her father couldn't survive another heart-attack. For the first time in her life, she felt loneliness, and became confused. She missed her father so she started to work in the farm as a tribute to him. Amidst this, she had never stopped conversing with Bagmati; she would talk, become quiet, cry, shout, feel heart-broken, curse to let her frustration let out. The river had changed a lot since her first talk with her. The river had been turned into a dumping site; the muddy road was changed into black-topped highways, trees were cut down, sand was excavated from the river, pavement was built, buildings were constructed. All these were done to make people's lives easier but they never thought if the river wanted it to be so, if the fishes in the river needed it. Yajju talked to local leaders, community activists, and others to think about the river too but none listened to her. "Thya

vikas gu nhye, Yajju (It is development),” they always tried to console her. But she couldn’t do anything. So she started to pick up the plastics and other garbage from the river herself. She didn’t get any help from anywhere. One early morning, she found an infant inside a cardboard box. She couldn’t believe it. She had different emotions at that time but later she decided to take him to her home. Her mother was shocked too, but didn’t mind keeping him. Their farming was going fine, that would help them to raise the baby.

Swornim calls an ambulance in the morning. He just wanted to spend a little more time with his mother so he spent a whole night sitting next to her. He had already witnessed his baju’s death before they moved here. At that time, his mother was also patient even though other relatives were in hurry to do death rituals. Neighbors also have started to gather outside their home as they saw an ambulance. Some of them suggest him to cremate her body near the ghat in their community. “Gune dha thya kha phum (Let’s cremate her here)” says one middle-aged man. “Makhu, aju,” he denies. “I’ll do as she wished. Please, let me fulfill her last wish.” Then, he takes her to Pashupatinath temple. He contacts the electric cremation department there, and instructs them to give him the remaining ashes.

That day, he goes to the same spot where his mother used to sit on the bank of the river. “See, I didn’t cremate your body in a pyre of logs. You didn’t want to burn your body and throw all those coals, ashes and others in the river because you loved the river so much that you didn’t want to pollute it. Mom, you always thought of not harming the river in any way if you can’t help it. So, you didn’t even fear not going to heaven if you didn’t follow proper procedure. And I did so as per your wish.” Strong wind blows in his right ear, leaves him shivering. Next morning, he buys a saffron sapling. He prepares everything needed and pours his mother’s ashes from the urn where he has kept it. “There will be another sapling for you every year on this day, mom.”

Effluent, Still She Waits

Susmita Khadka



The morning was indifferent, at least to me. The sun was not late like I was, the breeze knew where to flow, unlike me, and the place was screaming with languages I had yet to understand. History was racing to capture the attention of the writers meanwhile the present was nowhere near imaginable. Today, infrastructure has leapt into the future. Scientists mock gravity now. If you ask me how, it's simple; your dragons are apparently real. They fly across the sky where flyovers once did, however these dragons are far different than those mythical ones, as they appear with multiple compartments and windows worn in a metal hoodie, breathing schedules and destinations. Cyborgs deliver our meals, they are in charge of 'Speedo' similar to something once called Pathao, and they dare to smile without warmth. Unbelievable, I know.

Everything changed. Except me. I still worked day and night like a trained animal, obedient to clocks and hunger. AI and cyborgs couldn't take my job because they haven't stooped that low yet. I hate what I do. It pays me enough just to continue doing it. I am not good at anything. Not exceptional. Not needed. A replaceable body with a name that doesn't echo. Worthless. Hopeless. Only useful to the system who doesn't know me or even tries to remember my face.

Perhaps, that's why today too, the polite morning chose everyone but me. I was left all alone at the bank, robbed of my tranquility, deprived of hope and embraced by guilt when all of a sudden something strange happened. Someone chose me. Somehow, just like that I was the chosen one. Finally!

The air was thick with awkwardness when I first met her. I tried my best not to create such a foul impression because I didn't want to offend her but at the same time I couldn't even look at her, let alone go near her. So I stayed, afar.

Now I understand why they chose me. Turns out everyone else refused to meet her and I turned out to be an easier sacrificial lamb to them. Unfortunately, I would have been as

selfish as them too if I had an option to refuse. If it weren't for these embarrassing and unbearable tantrums of my stomach, I'd never step in the place she claims home. Homes are not supposed to look like that, and I don't believe it's possible to live in a place so cruel. If I, a homeless person, himself claims a home unworthy of living, then that's enough reason to believe me that this place can never welcome anyone with serenity. I had no idea that a place like such ever existed in a city so advanced! It looked as if it remained frozen, back in the past. "Oh, you poor thing, that wicked Time played the most ruthless, ruthless prank on you!"

Anyways, I was already inside the so-called home of hers where she offered me a black tea in a plastic mug, it was warm. I hesitantly accepted the hospitality, making sure my lips never touched a drop of that appalling tea and continued my job against my will. I sat in discomfort and uneasiness as the smell of her presence put me on a chokehold. My veins were fighting their best, pumping and rushing for a breath of fresh air. In the meantime, I was mixing all my papers, my hands were shaking, I was adjusting my glasses and then the moment came when I slightly and slowly dared to look up at her. Her gaze was awfully cold. Her eyes all fixed on mine seemed to have carried the weight of all the forgotten answers she sought.

All the questions I prepared for the interview started disappearing once she stood right in front of me. Without a surprise I started with the classic, "Hi, My-y name is Sarit N-Nepali" but I stuttered. I was shaking like a leaf, making it more obvious by fidgeting like a fool. "Umm, I called you yesterday for the interview of our .uh ...ahem programme," I now don't remember. "Do you recall, I mean remember..did you get the call?" She nodded without a single word, it was subtle but firm.

I took a pause and cleared my throat "Umm...We are here to feature your story. So, shall we? I mean start, may I ?" What is up with that, why are these words misbehaving all of a sudden? So, now even my very own language hates me. Wow, nothing new to me. Perhaps AI can take my job after all. On the other hand she wouldn't utter a single word, how frustrating.

In order to break the ice, ease the tension and to not make it more awkward, I hit her with a casual " So, how are you?" not knowing the cost I'd have to bear afterwards with what seemed like a completely harmless question at the time. It was the only question throughout the interview because the answer in return chained me and pushed me down inside a deeper darker well with no escape. Questions I prepared evaporated into thin air with her answer.

She smirked, that's the first answer she gave me. She smirked yet again as if she just broke out of her character. She started laughing. I had never known a laugh so hideous and so frightening at the same time. But somehow I recognised the sound of the laughter she produced, it played a melancholic tone. Suddenly, she stopped just like that. It was as if a

director shouted "cut" and let their actors break character. By this time, I became a statue with no movement and life, just a concrete audience or a witness of her madness.

Eyes didn't hesitate for a second, they were glued to mine. I could see her red veins slowly spreading like a drop of ink against water. It was an indication of a storm, a detrimental storm. Finally, the wait was over. I started hearing words like lightning, so fast and quick to respond and each lightning brought a thunder so strong it raced my heart even more.

She shouted furiously as if she could no longer hold herself back, "Why are you so pretentious huh? I don't understand! How is it so much easier when you do it but, when I try I fail, again and again and again. I try not to care like you do, I try to forget too, I try to ignore, I try everything! I try to be cold, unbothered, carefree, shameless, a hypocrite, cruel and all the evil things you are so capable of. But all I do is fail!

How you do it with so much humility and pride is still a mystery to me. Pretending like everything is fine, it is a serious set of skills to turn a blind eye on the wound you gave me even though you have the perfect pair of eyes. Isn't it hard to ignore the smell of the blood you shed? Doesn't it stink? Or perhaps you smell your stupid little victory even from my blood. Oh, look at you, smile at me with wide teeth and ugly laugh and a concrete intention to hurt me. Your spit burnt like acid on my skin. I screamed in pain and begged for you to stop, but I guess it wasn't loud enough. It was easier for you to simply dump me the next second there's no part of me left unhurt. I was declared no longer to be used. I was blamed for my unworthiness by you. And, in spite of all, your ignorance was what hurt me the most!"

My head was spinning because I had no idea what she meant by that answer. Nothing added up. I was completely bewildered. Each passing moment felt like I was in a war zone where nothing but death was on the other side of the ring, and I had no choice but to survive all of this. Therefore, I immediately knew that anything foolish on my part would be fatal, so I remained silent.

"Why were you silent? Why are you still silent? Who gave you the right to subject me to your silence all these years? And the audacity to ask why I am not like I used to be? Ask yourself; ask yourself why I ever changed . Why am I covered in your ignorance? Ask yourself why what you are looking for in me isn't there anymore! Aren't you tired of this act? Is my life just your little show? Is my cry for help music to your ears? Or do you really enjoy pretending that much? Or, a better question: are you even human? Ask yourself!"

This time it wasn't just anger speaking; betrayal was spiking on her thermometer. She seemed truly heartbroken and shattered. Of course I felt bad for her because whatever she was describing sounded brutal, but what did any of it have to do with me? I was a stranger to her pain. Moreover, I felt a surge of annoyance at being blamed for sins I hadn't committed. Besides, even if she did not intend to target me, I still felt frustrated to be tied here in her

theatre, where she had been acting crazy from the beginning. And her madness had finally peaked with that nonsensical question: ‘Are you even human?’ It wasn’t just ridiculous; it was deeply insulting in nature. I couldn’t believe I was being subjected to this absurdity. *Ugh, I can’t believe this. Obviously, I am a human, not a ghost; aren’t I?*

“Perhaps, you are. You are human!” she pointed at me. I felt a chill; it was as if she were reading my mind, echoing the very thought I’d just had. Remember, always remember, “*Not all humans but always a human!*” Agh! What is this pain? It was physical and it’s agonizing. I could feel a sudden shuddering jolt deep in my bones. She just hammered me with that truth which felt less like a sentence and more like a bittersweet revelation, a magical paradox that pulled the very poisonous air from my lungs. She turned my very own logic against me from which I can no longer take defense. And just like that the guilt I’d been running away from came flooding in. I was awoken! I understood her or maybe not yet. But somehow her pain isn’t a mystery anymore, because I can finally translate her agony.

“I don’t just hear her; I feel her rage because I can finally see her. Oh, Ms Bagmati we have wronged you, I have wronged you! I failed, I am so sorry. You are not mad, you were never mad. Crazy was the world around you where you were the only sane.” I was delighted to finally understand her and I wanted to assure that she is not alone anymore. Her rage at last fit the puzzle. But before I could greet her with my apology and seek her forgiveness, my apology died in my throat. She countered my unspoken mercy with a riddle that recast the mystery I thought I finally understood.

“Forgiveness? Oh, don’t you dare ask me for my forgiveness, yet again. If you believe forgiveness is the cure for my suffering, you are the worst kind of imbecile!” Her words sliced the thread at the precise moment I had finally learnt to press the cup against my ears. Now, I’m lost. My connection had died, making our communication impossible. And I found myself back at the starting line, trapped in this never-ending maze. I didn’t understand what I was supposed to do. Had I wronged her again in my attempt to make things right? The path was blurred, and the more I tried to reach her, the more frustrated I became. I thought I understood what she wanted. Isn’t seeing someone enough to fix the damage? Or am I wrong again?

She roared, “I have always forgiven! Forgiveness is my nature; I can not be heartless, no matter how much you wish it. It is no surprise that you don’t remember; you never do. You do not pay attention. You forget; forgetting is what you are best at. Perhaps that is how you function; perhaps that is your true nature. Since you are too embarrassed by your cowardice, you blame me! You lack the strength for your own guilt, so you dump it on me. You lack the courage to face your shame; hence, I am your dumpster.”

I am so sick of this; I am so sick of your dirty games. You left me in pain all these years, demanding I understand the reasons for your silence, yet the moment I give you a taste of

your own poison, it is too hard to swallow. Suddenly, I am in the hot seat, answering a question that originally belonged to me. “Why have you forgotten how to co-exist?” On top of this absurdity, you ask me why are my wounds too hideous for you to look at and how dare I ruin the aesthetics of your city. Why am I breathing out the venom that you fed me? Why am I the one forgetting? and why am I the one who is silent?

Oh dear I am not the one forgetting; I can never. I am not silent, rather silenced. I remember all too well; but do you ? Can you endure the trial of justice ? Honestly, I don't care whether you can or can not anymore. It is high time you hear your verdict. You are found guilty of murder! I did not forget I will never forget. You have committed unlawful killing and for this you shall answer.” She sighed heavily, trying to fight back the tears that strangulated her voice. “I just...”her voice could no longer hide its weakness, “I... My faith..My faith didn't just vanish; it bled out of me the day you decided to murder the life inside my womb.” Her eyes at last gave up and could no longer command the tears to stay. She faced a small betrayal of the composure she was trying so hard to keep. “You stripped away my motherhood; you murdered them! Each time a new life began to take root, you forced an abortion upon me without my consent and now you have the audacity to ask why I am sterile and a wasteland? You pathetic soul, you turned the sanctuary of my womb into a silent grave and ask me whether I have forgotten to coexist in harmony.” Her mask fell off a while ago which no longer compelled her to pretend to be strong and no longer bound her by the need to perform, she allowed herself to be raw. Completely drenched from head to toe, she sank slowly to the floor. And I stayed in silence like always.

She dragged herself from the ground back to the chair and with slow firm motion she brushed away her vulnerability because she still had a promise to believe in. “She still hopes because she was not entirely forgotten,” she proudly said.

“Willows bend to listen to my stories every time loneliness tries to capture me. A gentle breeze whistles the note of optimism for me every day before the dark clouds drown me. Meanwhile, Mr. Sun likes his morning walks slow and serene, so he comes to visit me every morning just to compliment me, saying there's no place other than my home that gives him tranquility. He always advises me to expect the excitement the morning brings and to accept every offer of a new beginning. Mrs. Moon, on the other hand, knows when to show up. She is always punctual. She uplifts me with her cozy smile that softens the edges of the night, and when the time comes to bid her farewell she slowly mumbles, ‘this too shall end’ and I sleep in peace. Likewise, my best friend Ms. Crane, I call her Pearl because Pearl always shows up in her pristine white dress and wraps her wings around me tightly to give me a warm hug every single time. See, the complexity most humans struggle to grasp is that our friendship is a shrine of selfless devotion and relentless kindness. She knows I tarnish her pearly robes with every embrace, yet she arrives without hesitation, unbothered by the

scars I have carved. She comes seeking the life she insists is still hidden within me. She still believes that I am capable of creating life!”

Yet again, she reached the final chapter of her precious story with an aching sorrow. She knew crying was her only way out of the weight of the emptiness she carried. She cried and I listened; it was an ugly cry. As she rained on me, each raindrop felt like a thousand lightning bolts electrocuting me all at once. I remained frozen despite everything I witnessed. I still don't know the answer and yes, I spoke too soon because she finally answered.

“Say, Mr. Sarit, do you think you are any different from the antagonist of my little story? Maybe you are, maybe you are not. But when you entered my home even though it was written all over your face that you wanted to escape this hell as soon as possible, you stayed. You are a funny guy, that's a compliment. Amongst many strangers, you are the only one to hear the best parts of me. Perhaps, you are the chosen one after all! So, you may go ahead and ask further questions if you have any, I will give you that pleasure because I like you.”

I had no questions for her whatsoever but I had questions for myself. Was it a successful story, should I be happy that she likes me or that this is all over. The decision of whether to stay or leave pushed me into a conundrum where every path seemed to lead me back to the same impossible question.

“Are you alright, Mr. Sarit? You seem a little lost. Allow me to help you. Maybe it will untangle all the questions racing in your head and help you with an answer.”

“Let me simply ask you, how long are you going to ignore the warm tea I offered you Mr. Sarit? Tsk tsk tsk. Poor thing is all cold now and yet look at it begging for your warmth all hopeful.”

By the time I could say anything, I felt the heat of my tears against my cheeks that slowly ran down like molten lava. That was my first tear in a long time.

“You wouldn't truly turn a blind eye, would you Mr Sarit, like all humans?”

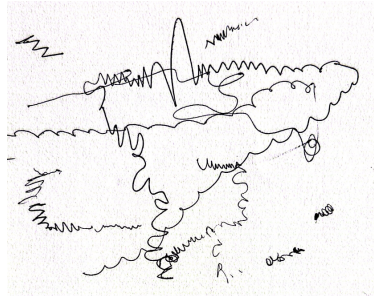
Don't worry about the tea. Shall I warm it up, once again? I was just kidding. I have a good sense of humor, don't I?

She let out an effortless laugh while she wiped the tears across her face with trembling fingers. Her smile, for the first time, was warm and radiant but her eyes told otherwise.

Those eyes were breathing words almost as if they slowly whispered in my ears, "Save Me"!

A Loved Bagmati

Ekta Adhikari



The sewage didn't disturb Bagmati's peace anymore. And Bagmati was healing, with her swimmers swimming in her belly.

The Bagmati that once drowned in sewage had been cleaned by EACH OF THE PEOPLE residing in the valley. From early six to late evening, people (from toddlers to elders who bent their backs half) volunteered as they filtered wastages wearing gloves and masks. They also got a stipend and free meals on hourly basis for their work. And the Prime Minister too, would join the cleaning campaign every week to boost their spirits. Her cabinet of ministers would follow her, too, setting an example of hope in the nation.

The sewage of each household was bound within the houses as it was now fueling ovens and gas for cooking by decomposition. Each household collected sewage in tankers and turned the waste into compost and methane. Then they used the same methane to cook food.

The provinces too had started to follow the trail of cleaning rivers. They banned sand and stone mining and granted rights to indigenous people to protect the rivers. Like in Kathmandu, they too filtered out plastic wastage from the river and turned them into furniture and art sculptures. Across Nepal, each house was fueling their own oven and using the extra methane to run buses.

The traffic jams in the roads were reduced by 50

The birds that hid themselves from the gross smell of the once unholy Bagmati returned to their lands to experience the tales of their ancestors. And the fish of the rivers were just theirs to feast on, not for humans to trap, kill, and sell.

Each of the countries across the world had submitted their guns and tools to scientists. And these very tools were molded into non-explosives that could be used for building everything from steel in bridges to needles for sewing. Carbon footprints were reduced by

powering existing buses with hydrogen fuel. The snow in the mountains started to reappear and the glaciers remained stable. Water was made available to all, and the world was united for greater good.

The landfills had been turned into parks as promised by the scientists, architects, and engineers. They collected toxic wastage into bins and locked them in the abandoned radioactive zone through drones. The Earth was thus healing, and her fever had gone.

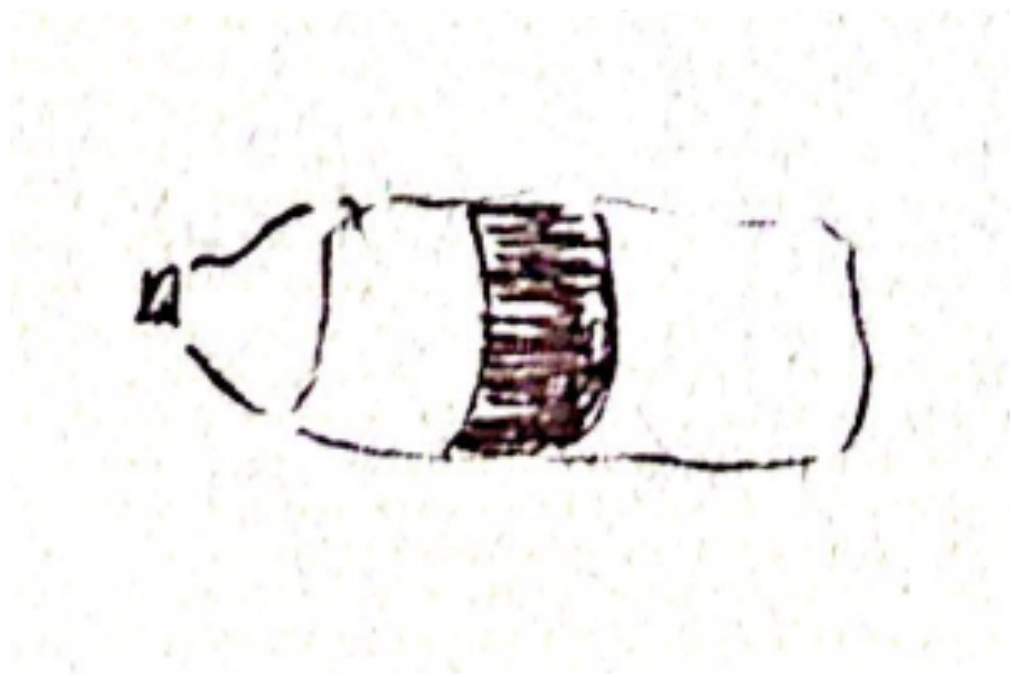


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