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Earth stories: a narrative understanding of farmlife in Pokhara, Nepal

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Earth stories: a narrative understanding of farmlife in Pokhara, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Humans love to tell stories. The purpose of this Creative ISP is to collect stories, of the plants and of the earth, render them through quotations and summary, and then discuss and reflect on how these stories could describe the relationship between people and the land. I hope a narrative understanding of our dependence on agriculture can bridge the gap in modern society that separates us so fundamentally from the earth that we live on.

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Introduction

Our lack of ecological awareness has led to the destruction of our own habitat and resources; if there's something we can all agree on, I would say it's that as a species we are out of touch with something fundamental. Theorists and scientists all over the world are trying to discern where we went wrong, where we're actively going wrong, and if there's a quick fix. I believe our approach to this topic is too reductionist to pinpoint a cause, and many of our remedial efforts can only be described as harm-reductive and surface level at best. Reflecting on our relationship with the earth will be a recurrent theme of this study.

Beginning to understand our relationship with the earth's resources naturally starts with examining agriculture. From my experience and perspective, subsistence farming is a dying practice in the West. It is deemed more efficient to mass-produce and trade goods. Nepal is a different story: from walking around rural villages and stepping just outside of the cities I have stayed in, it is clear to me that farming is a common form of attaining livelihood.

In this study, I will involve myself in the agricultural practices of different farming communities, familiarize myself with the practical and business side of the Pokhara agriculture world, and hopefully gain an understanding of the relationship that Nepali farmers specifically hold with the land. Given the more abstract concept of this project design, I elected to lean this project in the creative direction: I want to collect stories, of the plants and of the earth, render them through poems, quotations and summary, and then discuss and reflect how these stories could be acting to facilitate a holistic relationship between the people and the land. Why stories? Returning to the idea that our approach to understanding our climate dilemma is too reductionist: I believe that this problem needs to be targeted at an individual level, but in such a way that is totally holistic, and using emotional tact and nuance to understand our relationship individually

with the land and ultimately as a people. Throughout human history, we have been communicating in this way through storytelling. We are designed to understand stories with many moving parts, and trying to process something through a singular lens doesn't come naturally. I would like to posit that the semiotic narratives surrounding the earth and agriculture function as ecological checks and balances for the human species. This study will be a narrative account of my experience working on two farms in Pokhara, Nepal, with attached reflections on the function and relevance of land mythology and how it could possibly help us bridge the gap in modern society that separates us so fundamentally from the earth that we live on.

Part 1: The First Farm



Even ten minutes outside of central Pokhara, the air starts to change. I notice this after struggling for some time with the crank window of the taxi cab. The car suddenly fills with the smell of sunlight and buffalo dung. I breathe deeply and smile widely: the weighty buzz of the city is washed out of my head immediately.

The overpowering smell of petrol and fry kitchens disappear and the intoxicating perfume of rhododendron bushes and buffalo dung replaces it quickly. As we drive, the buildings shorten and dilapidate. Bamboo architecture steals the show, populating the roadside and peeking out

from behind trees. Dogs with curled tails trot out of the forest to attend to their affairs. A cow blocks the road. My taxi driver and the cow exchange glances and decide how they're going to avoid each other.

The higher we drive, the more we can see. The hills rise to reveal Pokhara as the valley that it is. The sloping descents all meet at the bottom of Fewa Lake, collected underwater in an invisible union. The birds that fly above are the only ones who may be able to see it. They are giants gliding in lazy circles.

The road becomes narrower. The roadside trees push their gnarled roots through the cement as if to assert that we are moving into a different territory, one in which wood is stronger than concrete. The slope finally evens out and we move into a village, where it's clear that taxis don't come to often. Children peer over porches and mud fences in clusters of red tikas and curious eyes. Old women walk in the middle of the road with absurdly large bundles of branches strapped to their shoulders. They look like trees that grew legs. The taxi driver honks and drives around them.

It was striking how quickly I was able to leave the city, and how the hills that shelter Pokhara seemed to have eyes. Their large green bodies are unassuming. Their sloping shoulders look wild and undisturbed, but behind the forest cover lay villages and farms and small businesses.

We find the farm that I was to be living at. I am dropped off at the top of a hill, next to a cow. We walk down together.

What We All Know

There are smells we all know

even when we smell them for the first time.

*Like onions and lightning and buffalo dung.
I'm on top of a hill and it smells like those things
And I'm given memories
that don't belong to me,
but I'm having them anyway.
The mud grips my bare feet.
I sink deeper and deeper into the ground,
which pulls me close,
Like it's an old friend
Who wants to tell me a secret.*

Baba is a lean man with birdish features. His shirt says 'Fitness'. Ama is a fast-moving woman. She has long brown hair that she ties into a bun. They live with Baba's mother, Hajurama, who is wrapped in bejeweled red scarves. She has two golden rings in her nose. She sits on a woven chair with her eyes closed.

Baba and Ama have a child. They call her The Baby. She is four years old. She wants milk in her rice, always. She cries if she doesn't get milk in her rice. She is learning English. She lies on the mat on the cement porch and writes her letters. They march across the page like British soldiers.

Their farm is on the side of a hill. The house and the fields are dug out of the incline like steps made for a giant. The steps aren't being used by giants, but there are several enormous hay domes sitting in various places, tall as trees.

The back of the house disappears into the hill behind it. The front of the house has two stories connected by a wooden ladder on the porch. Six doors face the mountains, three on the bottom and three on the top. The door to the kitchen is tucked at the right end of the porch.

“This is your room.” Buba shows me to a room on the first floor with two beds. The walls are painted green. There are cursive sayings in blue: “Never End Love And Peace” and “Happy with us”. Bags of rice and cornmeal line the wall.

“We make lunch now, go help.”

The kitchen has a dirt floor and a tin roof. Smoke pours out the door like it’s in a hurry to get somewhere. The fire is on the ground, where there is about four-foot clearance of breathable air. Ama is cooking squatted down on her feet, crouched small. When I walk in she pulls me down there too. “Down, no smoke.” She’s making roti over the open flame. She waddles to the spice cabinet, knees dipping back and forth like a counterbalance.

“We are making spinach today.” She holds a bundle of sprawling greens in her fist.

I am handed a plate of potatoes to wash and cut. I crawl out of the kitchen to cut them on the porch where I can breathe. A little bit of smoke follows me.

The hill the farm is on overlooks the valley. The hill closest to us is being used as a paragliding launch point. The paragliders circle the hill in flocks. They spiral slowly to the bottom, all going in one direction.

Buba sits next to me.

“I watch them every day. I got my license to fly alone. I will teach people how to paraglide soon.”

I quickly learn that Baba is a tourism worker, and is passionate about advocating for the rights of tourism workers. He tells me of his plans to guide helicopter rides to base camps. It is

unclear what helicopter he will use. He is also planning a guided trek with a German tourist. I help him proofread his text messages to organize the affair.

“We used to farm vegetables. Now, it is better to grow corn and wheat. We can buy vegetables with the money we get from the corn and wheat.”

I ask them if they eat anything they grow.

“We eat potatoes and greens and rice. We also grow those. The buffalo eats the corn and wheat flour.”

It becomes clear that this is a common occurrence. It’s explained to me that most of what anybody grows is corn and wheat. It is low-risk and high-production. They don’t need to subsistence farm anymore because it is much easier to buy the things they need instead of growing them. Baba says that everyone does this. He also says that it is impossible to be organic anymore, and the only people that have organic farms only do so because they are poor. He says that they would get chemical fertilizers and pesticides if they had the choice. He told me that their farm is only organic because they can’t afford the things they want to buy. “We do it in a traditional way. Everything is traditional.” He made it clear that it wasn’t because he wanted it to be.

The Beast

They grow wheat for the beast

And cut grass for the beast

and wipe glistening sweat off their heads for the beast.

They climb trees

And plow fields

*And tame dogs for the beast.
She eats their flour, drinks their river
Takes their beatings
And moans.
Dust falls from her mottled hide,
Her horns push and curl
to the sky
But before the sun rises, they squeeze her dry
And when it sets
they see what is left.
The bucket fills the bowls
of the dog, the baby, the women, the churn
And while her milk boils
She moans*

The cow or the buffalo is the center of the farm. Her dung is a powerful fertilizer. “Everyone has one,” Baba explains. If you don’t have one, your next step is to get one. Baba’s buffalo is an old woman, who sits in the corner of her enclosure. She is a massive animal. Her ears are like dinner plates. Her bones push against her skin like fast-growing bamboo. She curls up like she’s trying to make herself small, but it doesn’t work very well. She has a baby that is tied to a pole. The baby looks constantly surprised. The baby’s ears are like men’s dress shoes.

They wait for dung to drop,

Like gold from a pot.

There are piles, brown mountains, where the corn and wheat feed

Which fuels the beast

Which fuels the people

Which helps them

Climb trees.

Ama shows me how to lock the door. She puts her back against it and pushes hard, pulling the lock at the same time. She smiles.

“You need bug net.”

She pulls a blue net out from under the bed and we hook it to the ceiling together. She tells me that she was going to give me the room upstairs but it gets too hot at night. She points to a hole in the window. “Bugs get in through there.”

Once I settle in I learn about the family’s habits. They eat dalbhat for every meal, one at 6 am, one at 11 or 12, and one at 8 pm. They eat on the porch on a big mat. The baby cries about her rice. Baba and Ama watch Tik Toks together. Hajurama squints at me. I ask her questions in Nepali, and she laughs and responds too quickly for me to understand. The dal tastes like butter and fenugreek.

Night Beings

At night, my room comes alive.

The walls,

They shudder and creak

*Tiny creatures of the night tap, tap, tap
on the walls,
the floorboards,
checking for openings,
wondering if I've fallen asleep
The elven footsteps of cockroaches are a drumroll
To the nightly production.
A mouse falls from the ceiling,
And more follow his example,
Falling like marbles from the holes in the walls.
They leap to the windowsills and dance under the moon
like it's some kind of disco ball.
They rummage through my belongings and try on my clothes.
They jump,
Jump jump,
to reach the cornmeal atop of the shelf,
and then they cannot,
but their thuds are a heartbeat,
proving to me
that the room is alive, and I couldn't be alone if I tried.
I listen from my bed, and my time becomes timeless
As I join people across lives
who have been sleepless to these sounds.*

*We have been listening to mouse's choreography
since the beginning of time.*

In this bed, I had an important revelation about universal experience and religion, or one I thought was important. I felt an urge to categorize certain parts of the human experience, and it became clear to me that I could apply the same system to the objects in my spiritual practice. The older something is, the more times it has been touched and felt and used, the more powerful. There are some things that we have been doing and experiencing since before recorded history. Listening to mice crawl around our room. Putting our hands in the ground. Smelling a rainstorm. The older something is the more it contributes to mythology and pantheon and archetype. I wonder about these creatures that keep us awake. I wonder about what stories they star in.

The mice aren't the only things making noise. There are other creatures too, who are extras to the mice. They waste no time in contributing to the symphony. They scratch the paint off the walls with unknown tools. They chew the bedposts. They lick the dew off the windows.

Everyone has a different name for these night beings and different ideas about how to fend them off. My idea is to keep the door closed during the day, but they keep the cornmeal in my room, so everyone's always going in and out.

I could call them anything I wanted and you would know what I'm talking about. They are the things that wake you and make it hard to go back to sleep. They make your eyes fly open and your heart jump about. With no thoughts in my mind, I watched my body react to the sudden

sounds. I felt a strange amount of peace knowing that all throughout time, if other humans were to clear their mind in this exact way, we would be one and the same.

The next morning I learn that the most important task is to take care of the buffalo. Gathering edible plant material for the animals takes up most of the day. I sit on the porch with The Baby while she writes her English letters. Baba is talking to his brother, and then we will collect sticks. Hajurama is making a fire.

She makes the fire in the most haphazard way I've ever seen. There's no firepit, just some stones, atop of which a large basin of buffalo tea waits to be boiled. Hajurama tosses everything she can find under the basin. Dry grass, sticks, plastic bags, a broken slipper. She throws a match and fans it with a rice bag. It's clear to me that she does this every morning; within minutes, a small fire begins to grow. I'm impressed by her efficiency and intuition. I watch the uncontained fire spread to a pile of leaves with mild anxiety. She stomps it out with her flip flop and sticks two final logs under the basin that are so long they stretch across the yard. I'm reminded of the legs of the Wicked Witch of the West, except this time she is flattened by a pot of cornmeal stew.

I watch Hajurama catch a chicken with a frightening speed. She places a basket over it, and I watch as the chicken's whole world becomes incredibly small. I wonder what it's like to be the chicken. To have the mountains and trees disappear so suddenly. To have your world trapped in the inside of a basket, such that your light source is hatched and it blink blink blinks as you move. I wonder what it would be like to witness the rice on the ground in front of you as the only things that exist. Hajurama and I watch as the chicken eats all the rice. She tosses more on the ground and then moves the basket to the right. Baba comes to retrieve me. "Bamboo time!" He exclaims.

He climbs, his bare feet becoming hands in the patterned light. The branches bend underneath him, but they do not make a sound. He hacks at the limbs of the tree, his sickle curved like a hangnail. Branches crash to the ground one after another.

“How many branches do we need?”

“Fourteen, or fifteen.”

He tests the branches with his feet, going higher and higher, waiting for the branches to consider his weight and nod in approval.

Most of the tasks on the farm revolve around the buffalo. We collect branches in the morning. He goes to a different tree every day. All the people in the neighborhood communicate about what trees are becoming overgrown and which ones need to be left alone. His neighbors, his uncles and brothers and cousins, are an above-ground network of ecological maintenance. The felled branches don't belong to anyone, but they are always used. Baba sometimes leaves them on the side of the road to pick them up the next day, if they are too much to carry. One time, someone walked by and took some of the branches. They tied them into a pile and put them on their back and walked away. Baba didn't even look over, which I can only assume means that this happens all the time.

Every day, Baba would forget the rope he used to tie up his branches. He used the fibers of the tree to tie his branches instead. He would pull the young bark into strips and twist them together to make a cord. “All-natural,” he smiled. We went to the next tree.

I remember stories about how when Christopher Columbus came to America his men were shocked at the state of the forests and the land. Everything was vibrant and full. The land was so well kept that there were walking paths. They concluded that there must be some divine

caretaker and that they had happened upon the Garden of Eden. In truth, it was the indigenous people that lived there that took such great care of the land. They excelled at making use of dead material and excess plant matter, and the effect was visible. I had a similar impression of the hills that the farm were in; the bamboo, along with many other kinds of trees, were constantly being pruned and cleaned.

Baba knows where an old batch is. Vines grab at our sandals, trying to stop us from climbing the hill. I watch the bamboo trees shake in relief as he hacks dead weight from their shoulders. Underneath was pale and young. The old trees were like elderly fingers counting down 5, 4, 3, 2. The stalks get caught in the thicket above and we have to work together to pull them down.

It seems there is a Western conception that any disruption of natural life is detrimental. That you shouldn't pick flowers, or step near the rivers, or start any fire of any sort. But Baba and his neighbors toured his village daily and hacked up tree after tree. At first glance, through the lens of my Western conditioning that nature is best left alone, it seemed violent. He would summit the old trees and remove their limbs one after another, laughing gleefully when he lost his footing, only to regain it by lodging his sickle into the side of the trunk. But then I considered the fact that wild plants love to be pruned. The plants in my own garden grow back faster and healthier that way. I wondered how the trees in the area had learned to sustain the practices of all the people that lived there, who all had buffalos and all needed to feed them. The area was so well forested, but I saw people walking around carrying branches all day. I wondered if they were different than the trees back home that never got touched.

One day, we were carrying logs up a grassy slope behind his farm. The sun was a golden coin and the mountains were made of silk. Our bare feet gripped hard onto the clay-colored earth, sweat dripping right off our foreheads. We sat to rest on the side of the hill. The incline was so abrupt that I couldn't fold my legs underneath me. I would've started tumbling. Instead, I stretched them out, and it wasn't much different than standing.

He asked me what I thought of Nepal before I came here. The sun made spots blink across my vision, purple and green.

"I thought it would look just like this, with the mountains and the lakes. I didn't know there would be tigers though." I kicked a rock. We both watched it fall down, down, down.

"Have you ever seen a tiger?" The rock ducked under a faraway bush.

"The sound the tiger makes is loud from far away, but when he is close to you, it sounds quiet. But it is the same sound. We found a dead tiger down there. The police came to take, and we all watched from high up on the hill."

The clearing he pointed to wasn't far from where we sat. I imagined his whole family perched on the grassy outlooks.

"What did they do with it?"

"I don't know."

"Are you scared of tigers?"

"I saw a live one down there." He pointed to a different clearing to our right, which was no more than 20 yards from where we sat. I imagined it there, enormous and quiet, hidden by the lattice of the leaves.

The farmers need to take a lot of breaks. The hill is tall and the sun is hot, even in the late afternoon, and the logs are heavy. We had sat down a few times just on this trip up. Baba was playing with a plant growing next to him.

Open Palm

*He pets the leaves with an open hand
And if you weren't paying attention
you might have thought the sapling was a stray cat
that had rubbed against him,
Bobbing against
his crouched knees.
He touches the tree next to him
With an open palm
And if you weren't paying attention
You would've thought it was an old woman
He was passing in a crowd,
Or an old friend
he had happened upon.*

"Do you think plants are alive?"

"The tree bleeds like a person. The sap is blood, and the roots work to pull food from the ground just as we do. They are alive like us."

I was supposed to be collecting stories, but nobody has any for me. They shrug at my questions, or they tell me that the reason they do things is because they've always done them that way. They wish they could be doing them differently. I ask them if anybody they know would have anything to say about the traditions. They say no.

After a week of living with the family, Baba tells me he got a job in the city, and he could finally quit farming. We are sitting on his porch. His brother's daughter runs into the yard.

A girl pulls on a rose bush

Leaves fall to her braids like snow

She steals a blossom, a red wound in her hand

and quickly runs back home.

He says I can stay as long as I want, but I won't learn anything about farming. I ask him what kind of job he got. He tells me he is a manager now, and he has to buy a dark blue suit. He tells me the office is going to give him a new motorbike.

I take a taxi to Pokhara with all my things. They drop me off at the side of the lake.

Part 2: The Second Farm



This place is between two large hills. A wire fence and several small buildings (the bathroom, the house, the shed) surround a grass yard. A path out of the yard leads to the cow's enclosure as well as a plot growing corn and cabbage and beans. The path winds around the cow and leads to more corn and grass. The cow's name is Seti, which means white, even though the cow is the color of portobello mushrooms.

The farm is next to a river. Ama takes me to the bank, and we watch a pair of butterflies chase each other as a two children chases the butterflies. Several women wash clothes and dishes. The sun winks at the surface of the river and the river winks back a thousand times.

Baba and Ama live with their two kids. I call them Bahini and Bhai. They have a cow and two goats. When I arrive, one of the goats is pregnant.

They also have a dog that they keep in a small wooden cage next to the bathroom. The dog doesn't bark. Baba explains that the dog is trained to bark at big animals like tigers. One night, while me and the other American (Lucy) are sleeping, he taps on our window and tells us to come outside. The dog is barking wildly. Baba pulls out an extremely powerful industrial flashlight that he got from China. We look for tigers.

Baba makes a lot of milk products. There is a pot of milk boiling on the stove every other day, and then they put it under the counter to ferment. He makes ghee and mohi and yogurt and cream. He sits in the kitchen with a spatula attached to a power drill and whips the pasteurized product. He tests it with his pinky finger and then throws in some ice cubes when he thinks it's too warm. He's wearing his wife's sandals.

I ask him why the cow is sacred. He tells me that it's because without the cow, his family could not live. The cow is such a vital part of the farm. I ask him what the difference between the cow and the goat is. He says "we eat the goat". He tells me about a holiday devoted to the wealth goddess *lakshmi*, the protector of cows, where the cow is ceremoniously celebrated. "We put a tikka on her, we give her fruit," Baba explains, smiling. "But some people are starting to eat cows." Baba explained that the cow is becoming less protected by its sacred status. I ask him why, and he tells me it's because people need to eat. I wonder if that is truly what's changed-people have always needed to eat.

This farm is much bigger than the other one, and very well organized. There is a graded shoe system that ensures nobody wears day shoes in the house: sneakers are left outside on the ground, slippers are worn on the porch, and you can only walk in the house with socks or bare

feet. Baba breaks these rules while Ama is at work. Buttercream splashes all over the kitchen floor. He's still wearing his wife's sandals. Each shoe is adorned with a giant plastic flower.

Ama works as a nurse, and Baba stays on the farm all day to attend to his farm affairs. They take volunteers from all over the world to help them. I am staying in a small room with Lucy from Indiana. She is spontaneous and funny and loves to draw portraits. She's leaving for India in a week.

There's a spider in the kitchen. It sits on the wall like an outstretched hand. Ama screams and laughs and hits it with her broom. It disappears. "We do this every day," she laughs. "Then we make dinner."

Gold

Turmeric stains everything

the brightest of golds

The creases in her knuckles, the cast iron pans

the toothbrushes in the bamboo cup

next to the hose.

The sky has long been dark

but on the stone porch, the glowing rice

creates yet another

setting sun.

The turmeric is an important part of the house. It is grown by someone's mother, and then arrives in the kitchen in a blue plastic bag. "The turmeric is grown by his mother. Would you like

to see?” The turmeric lives in the cabinet, in its blue plastic bag, and gets taken out to fill the spice dish once a week.

I look into the spice dish. I see golden dunes waiting to be disturbed. It shares the dish with salt, chili, and coriander.

“We put chili and coriander, for spices, and then turmeric, for color,” Ama smiles. She piles the turmeric into the thakali by the spoonful. She puts it in everything else too. It makes its way into the potatoes. Into the pickles. Into the dal, into the cabbage, into the cracks in the counter beside the gas stove.

“You like?” She asks.

You don’t have to eat turmeric or even see it to understand. It is the color of marigolds. It is the kind of beautiful that is warm and familiar but still delights you every day. It is the sunset on a spoon. Everyone with eyes has seen the sun set. Everyone has had the urge to scoop it up with a spoon. I am reminded of the power of universal experience.

Hands

“Nepali people love to use hands,”

Ama grins

and wiggles her eyebrows.

She plunges her fingers into the copper plate, swimming with dal bhat

“Hands hands hands,

We plant and pull and peel and cook

With our hands,

And then with our hands

We eat.”

The dal has just been boiled, but you wouldn't know that until your fingers are in it, and you're mixing the salt and the oil and the yellow together with the soft pillowy rice. I would have burned my tongue on this if my hands weren't in it, I thought.

Maybe that's our problem. There's too many things between our hands and the earth. Sometimes it's a spoon. Sometimes it's a whole tractor. Sometimes its hot water and synthetic cotton and drywall and copper pipes. Right now it's nothing at all, and the lentils that were pulled from the ground have met a human hand once again. We are fated to touch our food, over and over.

The next day, I think about this as I push corn kernels into the ground. My fingers make holes like eyes. The thing I love most about working with the land is how sensational it often proves to be. The texture and temperature and intoxicating smell. The mixing of our skin with mud and seed. I have the revelation over and over again: this is where our food comes from. All food. Without our hands to remind us, it is easy to forget.

The Holes We Have Been Making

There are some things that people have been doing

Since the beginning.

Our fingers make holes in the earth

That don't vary much in size

For our hands are all made

The same.

As long as we feel the ache of hunger

*We will make the world a colander
That spills out the meat of the stars.*

Ama takes the cow to graze while she cuts grass. She has me hold the umbrella above her head. The dark patch of shade is a small moving spot in the sunbaked field. I ask her what she does in a day.

Ama wakes up at 5 in the morning. She makes dalbhat for breakfast, which takes about an hour. She sweeps and mops the kitchen, and the porch, and all the rooms, and the bathroom. She feeds the cow and the goats. Her husband sleeps. I ask her if she gets tired. She laughs and nods vigorously.

She finishes cutting the grass and jumps to her feet. "Watch the cow! I will be back."

How to Graze the Cow

Take the stick

And beat it.

Don't be afraid to hurt it!

Its skin is thick and

It feels nothing.

Make sure it is scared of you,

And stand far away so that

When you approach her, she knows

That she's in trouble.

Beat the neck, or the horns

And don't let her

Eat the corn!

She doesn't come back. Instead, a group of children approaches me. Some belong to Ama and Baba, some belong to neighborhood families. One girl is wearing what looks like a ballgown. Another girl has eyeliner that extends to her ears. A little boy is pulling out his hair and screaming in joy because someone said something funny. They are all holding plastic bottles filled with Orbeez.

“Hello!”

“Hello!”

“Hello!”

They dance around me like witches around a maypole. They are ecstatic in joy.

“Phone! Play a movie!”

“Please!”

They are delighted by my limited Nepali. “Basnus!” I exclaim. They all fall to the ground. The girl's ballgown blossoms like a flower. “Utnus!” They scramble to their feet.

I observe my surroundings and think about what it would be like to grow up in this field. To have all my childhood memories scattered across these corn plots and riverbeds. From my early life growing up with only a forest to entertain me I could relate: the realms of childhood imagination are absolutely indefatigable. I was endlessly entertained by bark and leaves. I watched as the kids carried the same manic creativity untethered by societal doctrines.

Lucy runs up to me. Her messy curls are the color of sand. She wears a giant red soccer jersey.

“Dalbhat just exploded ALL over the kitchen. I think I scalded some kids. Ama is on her period. You know the Nepali thing where women can’t go in the kitchen when they’re on their period? So yeah, we have to cook.”

“What? What do they do when there’s no volunteers?”

“I don’t know, but we still have to make dalbhat. It’s all over the kitchen. Do you know how to use a pressure cooker?”

The idea that menstruation is unclean and merited a kitchen ban struck me as unfair. My Western feminism radar was going off. However, once I saw it in practice, I understood the appeal. Ama worked from the moment she woke up until the moment she went to bed. She cooked and cleaned all day, on top of her full-time job in the city. For a week out of the month, she had a break from her second job. For the week she was off, the quality of the food suffered, because Baba didn’t know how to cook anything and the cooking responsibilities fell into the hands of their twelve-year-old daughter, who also didn’t know how to cook anything. But for a week, Ama got to sleep in until 6:30. She got home from work right before dark and instead of jumping into the kitchen to make dinner she got to relax instead, or do the cleaning that she had been meaning to catch up on. I thought that it might enforce ideas that regarded menstruation as something to be ashamed of, but Baba did not hesitate to explain what was happening. I didn’t detect any shame at all. It was a joke in the family: Ama would stand in the window of the kitchen, laughing at her daughter’s cooking mistakes. I couldn’t help but wonder if this is the reason the tradition survived: in a culture where much of the labor burden falls on women, it seems adaptive to have some built-in time off.

This is something I encountered a lot. I was confronted by the logistics of certain traditions. In many cases, the narrative behind a tradition was lost, but the tradition itself was

kept, even if it seemed conceptually arbitrary at first, because something about it, sometimes something subtle, was fundamentally appealing.

I was standing in the rain watching the chickens when Baba told me that they were going to visit his family for a week. He jokingly asked if I could watch his farm, I told him that might not be the best idea, and he nodded in agreement. We pushed the chickens back into their cage. All but one cooperated. It was a little black rooster, who ducked under one of the hay stacks. A little boy chased him out.

I left the farm the next morning. I walked to the bus stop and found a big blue one with no one in it. A boy in sandals appeared. “Where do you want to go, Miss?”

“Lakeside!”

He shrugged. “We can go there.”

Part 3: Thoughts



Nobody had any stories to tell me. While I heard about holidays and religious festivals celebrating certain aspects of agriculture, the traditions seemed somewhat detached from daily practice and philosophy. In many discussions of religion, there is often a distinction between religious doctrine and emotion, between the institution and the individual. It was clear to me from my time on the farms that some traditions and beliefs weren't revered for their spiritual weight but instead for their socialization as mandatory practices. I was surprised by the lack of

religious philosophy in farming. I was surprised that I was assured by many people I asked that the two concepts had nothing to do with each other.

While I tried not to have expectations going into this, I generally hoped my understanding of our climate dilemma to become more nuanced. I hope there was a difference in conscience between Western thought and Eastern thought that would reveal some clarity; I had the impression that agricultural workers, and people in general, on the other side of the world may see climate change differently. I thought that “developed” countries are seen as responsible for our changing climate, so Westerners are automatically assigned a guilty conscience. Deserved or not, this guilty conscience affects how we talk about climate change, how its portrayed in the media, and how we interpret its progress. We have so many feelings: guilt, anger, frustration, confusion.

The country of Nepal, with its limited production and agricultural concentration, does not contribute a detriment to our global crisis in a way that’s substantial. There is minimal sense of responsibility for the changing climate, only a sense that the country is being left out of the benefits of Western development. Baba’s friend came to visit the farm; he was a Shell representative, and cared deeply about the country’s economic progress. “Nepal is a poor country, that’s why we do agriculture. We don’t want to. We want tractors and tools, but we are too poor to get them.” When I asked Baba if he thinks there is an intersection between religion and agriculture, his friend interrupted immediately. “There is no intersection. Farming is all about money.”

This was a response I received again and again: a confusion, as to how religion and agriculture could ever mix. My conception of religion is deeply tied to spirituality, and I quickly understood that this idea was not universal. I got the impression that spirituality is a way of life,

and religion is tradition. The reason the West has a distinct concept for this kind of sacredness is because we are accustomed to a life of things that aren't sacred. The pinnacles of life in Nepal are all sacred: the cow, the milk, the kitchen. Sacred ideas are so ingrained that it becomes too subtle to discuss, it is not conceptualized. The things that can be talked about are the traditions and the values that are culturally accepted, because when you ask someone questions, they take on the responsibility of representing the community. They say "this is what we do". So, there were no stories being told. In the places I visited, preserving biodiversity was not a priority, and organic farming was an accident.

The lack of animistic narratives could explain the rapid shift from subsistence farming to commercial farming. It could explain the decrease in cow worship, or the increase in chemical fertilizers. What I observed in my time on these farms led me to believe that I was looking in the wrong place. Whatever happened in the West that led to the desacralization of natural resources is more widespread than I believed, and it may be necessary to look harder to find places in which narratives protecting the earth's resources are still present and functional. However, the differences in philosophy that I witnessed between my home country and that of Nepal was enlightening in its own way. Reflecting on these differences throughout my independent period led me to a conclusion- not one that I expected, but one that I welcome regardless.

The conclusion was that there is a Western conception of spirituality, associated with a connection of nature, that is quite sensationalized. I was subject to this view when I came to Nepal. There is this aggrandized serene oneness that is seen as the ideal state- in touch with yourself, the world, nature, the people around you- but at the same time, it is seen as coveted and unattainable. Elusive, even- it is touted that the only way to get to this mythical state is to rid yourself of all worldly distractions, get rid of your phone, start a garden, meditate every day, do

yoga in the sun. It is something you must give up everything enjoyable for, and then you wait, and this mysterious state of being will come to you.

But if I have learned anything in this month it is the following: enlightenment is right around the corner. Enlightenment, religious ecstasy, or even just simply spiritual emotion, is everywhere. It's a deep breath of good air. It's the sight of sunlight on the tops of evergreens, or the voice of someone you love. It's warm grass, it's beautiful music, it's the smell of hydrangea bushes, or maybe of onions or lightning or buffalo dung. I don't think it can be forced, and I don't think it can be harnessed to save the world from climate change, because it is much bigger than anything we know, and if it wanted to save humanity from climate change it would. And it might. I came to the conclusion that I, and maybe the whole of Western civilization, should stop pretending spiritual satisfaction is some kind of unattainable state we always have to break our backs working toward, and accept it might be impossible to study and impossible to explain, and just go stand on top of a hill. And breathe.

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