



January 2016

Kathmandu— Autumn 2015

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Recommended Citation

Craig, Sienna. 2016. Kathmandu— Autumn 2015. *HIMALAYA* 35(2).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol35/iss2/17>



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Kathmandu - Autumn 2015

Sienna Craig

Beyond a sea of tarpaulin
I do not know what to expect
My landing as tentative as the city's
Dust is self-assured –
Competing, like the grit of this place does,
With mountain air and mongrel howls

For a town under Pangaea's siege
The streets of Kathmandu reveal
As much continuity as change
Dawn comes with knuckles of ginger,
Chilies clustered in blooming fists,
Limes like mottled marbles:
A miniature world of tastes
Laid bare by roadside women,
Saris frayed, foreheads creased
Hands signaling a life close to the earth
Even as they paint patterns of spices
Across a burlap canvas, on the concrete
Edge of life – these familiar
Landscapes of possibility and woe



A two-storey stone, mud and wood building that was severely damaged in the May 12 earthquake, Dolakha.

(Mark Turin, May 2015)



Bimaya Thami resting in a temporary shelter after a morning spent excavating her family home, Dolakha.

(Mark Turin, May 2015)

Witness this thing called living
In the color red, in marigolds
And the tarnished sediment of *ghee*:
Yesterday's butter lamps soften into
Everyday worship, head bowed
For the briefest of moments
Before the return to labor:
Shaking rain from bundled mustard greens
Blowing grime from spark plugs
Sorting soda bottles from scrap metal and onion peels
Sweeping the square meter that marks
A living's domain
Crooning '*bananabanana eggplanteggplant*'
With high-pitched resignation

I did not expect her to be broken
But to find the wounds
Is another matter – what can I know
Of terror from simple remainders:

Strawberry blonde bricks scattered
At the skirts of this ancient *stupa*;
Calked 'X' to mark the spots where
This angry earth tore across a wall;
Painters run in short supply these days,
As if the gods refuse to whitewash suffering
With a rainbow of pastels

The Red God¹ navigates his city
Compassion spilling onto cracked streets;
A leaning tower of memory in the bodies
Of men who bear him up;
In the warped flesh of his palanquin;
In all who gather to mark this spectacle
Of resilience –
And this, too, a tired word
When on the southern plains, when across
Fault lines of belonging, people are asking:

What is civility?

Where will we live?

Whose country is this?

When will it stop?

Taxi drivers text this to each other

As they lean against endless unmoving

Snakes of dented tin and balding tires, waiting

For fire – fuel in their bellies;

Housewives whisper this to each other

As they watch the midmorning meal

Simmer on the dregs of gas cylinders;

Students shout this to each other from

Battered railings of busses, in their

Efforts to commute, singing

The tune of uncertain futures;

Never mind the zones of abandonment

Where a nation's pain is barefoot and acrid

Like garbage fermenting in the sun

Two hands palm-to-palm do not

A homeland make

But to meet where nimbleness

Brushes up against precarity, where language

Bleeds into understanding, where foreheads touch –

Aama and me this morning, after prayers

And boiled eggs – reminds me

Of something beyond good faith,

Of something more than *duck, cover, and hold*

Of something more like the pipal's rooted tenacity

Living the elements of which it was born

Sienna Craig is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology at Dartmouth College. She is the co-editor of *HIMALAYA* and the co-founder of DROKPA (www.drokpa.org), a nonprofit organization dedicated to partnering with pastoral communities in the greater Himalayan region to implement grassroots development and promote social entrepreneurship. The author of several books, including *Horses Like Lightning: A Story of Passage through the Himalaya* (2008) and *Healing Elements: Efficacy and the Social Ecologies of Tibetan Medicine* (2012), she enjoys writing across genres, from ethnography to poetry and creative nonfiction.

Endnotes

1. Rato Machhendranath is a deity in Buddhist and Hindu traditions, and is a cornerstone of Newari ritual life in the Kathmandu Valley. Each year the statue of Rato Machhendranath is taken between a temple in Patan and the deity's 'birthplace' of Bungamati village. In 2015, the April 25 earthquake interrupted the movement of this deity, celebrated in part to honor the rain gods at the start of monsoon. The deity completed its journey this year in late September.



Commuters traveling along the Jorpati Road, Kathmandu, October 2015.

(Craig, 2015)