A Dirge for Kathmandu

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Acknowledgements
The author is deeply grateful to all staffers, scholars, administrators, and students who were affiliated with the Cornell-Nepal Study Program (Kirtipur) during the Spring 2015 semester. He also wishes to thank the editors of HIMALAYA for their feedback and support.
Soap squeaks in my ears
when the room erupts.

I watch Thamel bustle
from fourth floor windows
when the ground gives way.

The earth swells and swirls
like tremulous bile,
shaking buildings to their rebar marrow.

The mythic lake opens jagged jaws
to swallow its urbanites whole.

Dust settles on our skin,
and there’s no sea to carry us off.

So we run
to solid ground
and open space
with fear in our hearts
and tired bones in our shoes.

Figure 1. Buildings tilt precariously after the April 25 earthquake, rendering a jagged skyline along the roads of Kathmandu.

(Linder, 2015)
Buildings tilt like scarecrows 
and perish before sirens wail. 
We smoke on red bricks 
that used to be a wall 
and remember this grand city 
as it was just ago 
before so much crumbled 
like Jericho.

There’s nothing to do but walk, 
away from the towers, 
away from the shakes, 
down Kantipath curbs, 
where mayhem masses mill about 
and motorbikes growl through 
like iron bulls 
on parade. 

Farther. 
Past Naya Sadak, 
where choked hordes 
hemorrhage from the Old City. 
Down to Tripeshwor, 
where royalty rises in the shattered chowk. 
Onward still 
to tired Balkhu, 
where an auto shop might have stood 
had its neighbor not 
topped down 
so that one pile of rubble 
became two. 

Panic reigns in these darkened streets. 
Past salt-eyed mothers with 
babies at their breasts. 

Figure 2. Walking and rubbernecking, a young man surveys a collapsed building in the earthquake’s aftermath. 
(Linder, 2015)
Past fallen temples
that god forgot.
Past a façade
now tumbled to sidewalk debris
so you can still see the innards
like a dollhouse:
the second story office
with desk chair overturned
and picture frames askew.

And finally,
straining aching, aging muscles,
up the hill to Kirtipur.
Because we’re the lucky ones,
looking out upon this fallen city,
tight-throated and quiver-lipped,
to sing elegies for another lost layer
of Kathmandu.

Benjamin Linder is a PhD student in the Department of Anthropology & Geography at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His academic research explores the relationship between transnational mobilities, cultural transformation, and the (re)production of urban space in Kathmandu, Nepal.

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