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A Dirge for Kathmandu

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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.
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
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and the (re)production of urban space in Kathmandu, Nepal.

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