goddess of between

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by Drew Searchinger
Reading list


Abstract

I have great faith in the power of stories. They speak for themselves, lulling us into a state of receptivity, calling us to listen for a teaching we may need to hear. The stories we engage with forge growth within us; shine light on layers of the self we did not know how to see. A lecture stands in front of you, but a story encompasses you: takes you in, asks to be understood. To be heard. When I began writing these stories down, I did not think about how they might fit together, what thread might bind them into one. In the process of compiling the snapshots into a larger body, they have revealed a message of the feminine principle that I’d yet to hear—a message that will continue to evolve beyond my very limited understanding of it, but for now, leaves its mark on this project. I won’t pretend the interpretation of these stories is without bias, for I experienced them from an inherently self-centered perspective. Still, I have tried to convey them as true to their own tone as possible, with the due autonomy they command. These stories made me feel rightly small and silent—my only job to listen and be humbled by them, as stones polished by the river. I hope a sense of stillness can be found within their wake.

I feel greatly fortunate to have been briefly acquainted with a place so potent as Bodhgaya. Bodhgaya challenged any dualistic conviction I had of this world, of life and death, of the feminine and the great mother archetype. The stories of this place split me open; had something to say about the holes within my skin. From a Buddhist perspective, it is sometimes said that the goddess fiercely reveals emptiness; the empty nature of our ever-changing experience. The journey that granted access to these stories tore through my conceptual understandings of self in world… I hope to communicate what I can of the wonder at play within them. I know that these stories are not mine; if any good comes of sharing them, then it is for the sake of story alone. Thank you for listening.
The stories we live
are the stories we must be told.

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**Sujata Village**

Bodhgaya is a town in northern India, centered around a tree called the Bodhi Tree. When the Buddha became enlightened, it is said, he was sitting beneath the Bodhi Tree. Bodhgaya revolves around this memory: devotionally, industrially, and collectively. Before the Buddha attained liberation, he nearly starved to death while practicing austerities in a cave. He attempted to travel to the nearest village for nourishment, but collapsed in the forest from exhaustion. A young girl named Sujata, daughter of a Brahmin priest, had been sent to the forest by her father with a tray of offerings for the forest deities. She found the Buddha unconscious beneath a tree, and assuming he was a deity, began to spoon-feed him milk rice. When he was revived, he knew the path to enlightenment was of the middle-way: balance, neither deprivation nor indulgence. Within weeks he attained enlightenment, and remained in the forest where Sujata brought him a daily meal of rice and fruit. She was one of his first disciples, along with other children from the village. If the children could understand his teachings, the Buddha knew there was a chance they could be received by adults, long conditioned by egocentric thought patterns.

Situated just across a bridge from Bodhgaya, Sujata Village stands to acknowledge her existence— the essential role she played in the unfolding of the Buddha-dharma. If the world forgets, Sujata Village will remember— her very name a reminder that behind every great act is another; that a binding undercurrent of innocence runs through us all. Sujata: the water that allowed a great seed to grow. There is a temple built for the Bodhi tree, now safely enshrined and accessible for pilgrims to drape flowers from the fence, touch the bark and weep, wait for leaves to fall and take as souvenirs. To circumambulate the tree is to walk around it in circles; always with the tree to your right. Around and around— a vortex, a galaxy. Each step in confidence that there is an escape from human suffering, and this is it.
Mahakala Mountain Center

In her deep red robes, Khandro-la floats with a presence that cuts like blood into water: profoundly focused, humble, and quick to diffuse. She has come to the Rocky Mountains to share her story at a seminar called *Awakening the Divine Feminine in Buddhism*. She presents the first morning—shares her work as a nun, scholar, activist, and educator; the decades she’s spent steered by compassion and wisdom. She is captivating: you hang on her every word.

Selflessly she teaches; to bridge eager minds with information, to counterbalance however she can the global injustice that is women’s access to education. Tirelessly she works to create opportunities where there were none, to forge spaces where all have the opportunity to train their minds.

She offers five parting pieces of advice, passed down for centuries amongst Tibetan Buddhists:

- **Confess your hidden faults.**
- **Approach what you find repulsive.**
- **Help those you think you cannot help.**
- **Anything you are attached to, give that.**
- **Go to the places that scare you.**

She feels no pride and accepts no praise for her work, insistent she’s only tried to do what needs to be done. She extends an invitation to help teach the nuns she sponsors in India, then offers a prayer and a bow before leaving the stage. You buy a plane ticket the following day— not for confidence in your ability to teach, but for certainty that you have many things to learn from this being in red robes. You want to exist within the web she is spinning.
Air India

Leaning against the window a Japanese man sleeps, features long and wise as if time has slowly stretched him. By the aisle sits a petite, wrinkled Indian woman in red lipstick, blue silk and pink knit socks. She is technically in your seat, but gives a wide, golden-capped grin when you approach that says finders keepers. You squeeze into the seat between them.

She continuously pulls shredded tobacco from a brass container, grinds it between her palm and thumb, pulls open her bottom lip and sticks it to her gum. Her fingers are stained from decades of contact with spices you’ve never seen; her fingerprints the matrix of a reality you cannot comprehend. She is yelling at the women sitting in front of you, she is playing snake on her flip phone, she is spitting brown tobacco juice into a plastic cup.

She pats your hand and asks you a question in Hindi, to which you smile and shake your head. She asks louder, as if volume is to blame for the ocean between you. On and on she continues; your silence of little importance. Only later do you realize your inability to communicate more than a smile may have been the very reason she persisted, content enough to bounce words off of you like a racquetball game, echoing through blank and enthusiastic eyes.
The Nunnery

The nuns pop out of two SUVs and land on the gravel, red petals falling from a rose. They rush into the bathrooms that scarcely have soap but always have rats, finally at the end of their three-day journey on foot, bus, train, and van from the mountains to the valley. You stand aside grinning stupidly, suddenly enveloped by a childlike nervousness. Not for anxiety, but because their presence is so overwhelmingly bright, all persona slips away and you’re left with no idea how to introduce yourself. Your teeth chatter as you bow.

The nuns have brought cases of apples, strapped to the SUVs with colorful plastic cord. As they hoist the fruit down and pass it along a chain of hands snaking into the kitchen, they tell you the apples are from their hometown, “very very very far” away. They point towards the sky. They bring more apples than personal possessions: just a few pieces of clothing each, their robes, books for the older nuns and some toys for the youngsters. They bring bedrolls and blankets, rugs, shawls, knit socks and hats, a few laptops, one mug and one bowl per person, sacks of dried ghee and barley. Mostly, they bring apples. For rather small beings, they eat the apples ferociously, and empty the cases just as the guavas begin to ripen in October. In the brief period between apples and guavas, they satisfy their sweet teeth with a combination of barley flour and raw sugar, mixed at a 1:1 ratio and consumed with soup spoons.

You learn the word in Hindi for guava is amrut. When the guavas are ready, the littlest nuns are tasked with the harvest. They flock to the garden in teams, bunching their robes above their knees so they can run, then using the fabric like a basket to haul the fruit back inside. When you find a young nun in the kitchen trying to slice a guava with a meat cleaver, you point to the fruit and say “amrut?” happy to use the word. She puts down the meat cleaver and says “I am fine, ma’am! How are you?” You stick with guava from then on.
Ceiling fans

The first month is the kind of hot that sticks to your body like wet tape. The nuns fan each other with newspapers and crowd the office between lessons to drink from their beloved water cooler. You watch longingly as they chug, pressing the cool metal against each other’s foreheads. The water comes straight from the river; they offer you glasses and say “tee-char, you want?” but you grimace and shake your head, highly advised to drink boiled water only. You don’t get used to dysentery, a travel blog reminds.

The nunnery’s project manager, and your sole English-speaking companion for the first several weeks in Bodhgaya, is a 36-year-old Bihari man nicknamed Choolu. Your fourth night at the nunnery, he asks if you want to go see some of the tourist attractions. In these days of air like hot breath, excursions are made for necessity, not desire: a SIM card, shampoo, a towel. Months later, Choolu declares that he never wanted to take you anywhere, wary of the gossip that pipes through his town. But by then your skin is thick with an armor that takes nothing personally—by then you know you are not your body.

You visit the 80-foot Buddha statue, and the Sri Lankan Temple down the road where tourists like you take pictures and try to appear as though they aren’t sweating. You are on your own for the Thai Temple; Choolu will meet you at a chai stand nearby when you are finished. The inside is immaculate: paintings, statues, and offerings all arranged with meticulous care, the shrine dusted, polished and swept incessantly. Busloads of elderly Thai women in matching shirts and hats shuffle into the temple to bow, make offerings, and leave donations, faithful that the contributions they make will bring karmic benefit. There are three donation boxes: one says donate here for health and wellness, for you and your family. The next says donate here for auspicious circumstances and the spreading of the Dharma. The last says donate here for
material stability and abundance. You waver for a moment, consider the consequences of picking one box over another, then decide to divide your change evenly amongst the three.

As you exit, you pass an old woman sitting on the ground beside the temple’s gate. Her limbs are disabled and bones protruding. She tugs at your pants and pleads for change. “Didi, didi please. Didi, please.” The rupees you just deposited sink into the boxes like weights into your gut; the temple grows shinier as her pressing palms quiver. Ashamed and frustrated, you walk quickly down the road, your sweat accumulating a layer of dust that leaves you coated. You can hear the change pile in heaps on the wrong side of the fence.

At the chai stand, a husband and his young wife are running a quick operation. She brews a new batch, standing over the pot, pouring a plastic bag of milk from enough distance to create bubbles. He sits on a crate and rinses the small glass tea cups in a pail of gray water. You watch as he fills a new bucket at the hand pump, dumps it into his wash bin, and soaks the cups before his wife fills them with chai.

You don’t get used to dysentery.
Didi

The word for sister in Hindi is didi. Didi is a woman’s word. Men say it to their sisters and wives, to the women selling vegetables when they want a good price. But it feels better woman to woman. A pulse. Didi. Didi. A reality check. Even if, especially if, it comes from a wrinkled woman with a cup of loose change between her toes. Didi. Didi, please.

Bodhgaya loves its goddesses. The whole world loves its goddesses; though it doesn’t always acknowledge them. But Bodhgaya sings their praises with shrines, statues, and temples of all sizes, of all different goddesses—Saraswati, Durga, Lakshmi, Sita, Tara, Kali-ma, Parvati. Various colors, bodies, dispositions; various faces of the same jewel, the same mother. Every didi is celebrated and revered. Didi. Didi, please.

In the past few years, there has been so much domestic violence in Gaya that the government decided to ban alcohol. They say it’s better now. Smuggling is a profitable venture—men risk decades in jail for suitcases of whiskey. Didis and children wait at home, chai on the stove. Like battle. Like history repeating itself.

A pulse.

Didi.

Didi.
**Cow House**

The nunnery is made of marble. Choolu says he bought the cheapest stone, ground it down, and wah! Marble! He laughs. It is a naked palace, stripped of ego, yet the floors cannot tell a story any less regal. Last year’s prayer flags hang from the roof, now faded and worn. In December, you give Choolu a small wad of rupees to have lights put up— a Christmas gift for the nuns, who started asking about Santa Claus in October. The wiring work is done by a nine-year-old boy, who carefully drapes strands of color-changing bulbs from the ledge. As he leaves on the back of his brother’s motorcycle, he warns that if you touch them, you will probably get shocked. Choolu promptly locks the door to the roof until the boy returns two weeks later to take the lights down.

From the roof, there is a perfect view of the teacher house on the far right corner of the land, against the river. Two monks from the nuns’ villages in the Himalayas stay here. The nuns bring them three meals a day, and tea in the afternoons. You are told they teach the nuns Dharma, though when Khandro-la comes to visit, the older nuns admit they are no longer learning much from their male instructors. She wastes no time beginning the search for a new teacher, certain from her own experience that without adequate guidance on the path, one cannot travel far. The nuns continue their meal service as though nothing will change.

The land’s only other residents are Malu and Lahesh, who Choolu refers to as guards in spite of their many roles. They watch the gate, take care of the land, run errands for the nuns, and attend to the two brown cows they share their small home with. The cows are both female— a mother/daughter duo. Mom is pregnant again, and her first-born is full of anger. She head-butts anyone who comes near, and delights in breaking free from the rope around her leg to terrorize the nuns. Malu and Lahesh have to hit her with sticks in order to maintain some control. “She
will calm down when she is with male cow,” Choolu insists. You ask if it may just be her personality, and he looks at you strangely for a few seconds before responding. “She will calm down,” he affirms.

Malu and Lahesh are big brothers to the youngest nuns—dearly adored playmates. They snack together, relax beneath the neem tree, and compete in an intricate version of tag called caputi that you never work up the courage to try. Malu takes weekends off to visit his 19-year-old bride, who he will marry as soon as the dowry is settled. Lahesh rarely leaves, instead sending money home for his wife and two daughters. Choolu tells you Lahesh’s four-year-old has paralysis, already using planks of wood to support her movements. “A poor crippled girl,” Choolu says, “who will marry her? Who will take dowry?” Choolu shakes his head, wishing he wasn’t right. On the marble steps you see Malu carefully tying a purple scarf around an excited young nun’s head as though it were a ponytail, her legs bouncing with joy.
River I

The river flooded last year, you are told. A man was trapped in the middle: he climbed the telephone pole and clung for as long as he could before letting go. It was sunrise, he’d been jogging. A crowd watched from the bridge; a crowd that evidently could not swim. A crowd that did not have enough rope, enough faith, or enough motivation. The man was Chinese. The sun rose anyway.

“Don’t walk by that pole,” says Choolu. “Bad energy.”

The river is sacred: it is believed that to send bodies off in this river is to save them from the cycles of rebirth. Part time river, part time football pitch, part time cremation ground.

A sadhu lives in the middle of the river. You meet eyes many times before you meet in name. She sends currents through your body, but you are not afraid. She is wild and rooted— the witch you always dreamed of.

The river is no man, no woman’s land. You are not safe there, but you are something close to free, so you spend as much time by the water as possible. If you venture far enough, you will undoubtedly find a man crouched and shitting in the sand.
As the setting sun

A woman in a red sari emerges from the horizon and starts in your direction. You freeze, wondering if she is a mirage, lulled by the fluidity with which she dances across the river. When she is within earshot, she says “I see you!” and smiles with a fluency that goes far beyond language. She asks you a few questions in Hindi; watches your face contort in confusion and laughs. You admit with red cheeks that you speak no Hindi, to which she says “not much!” still laughing. From then on, the only English words you hear her say are hello and friend.

She navigates the river as though it’s her own. If her pink, 2009 Motorola isn’t ringing, then she’s playing the same three Bollywood songs on repeat and singing. If she isn’t laughing, then she’s shouting. She is aggressive, unpredictable, and captivating; a flame that knows the undoing of bone. She points to herself and says Guria. She points to you and says Pritti. You do everything she tells you to, never asking why.

Guria looks at your hair, your arms, your clothes—laughs at your flip flops, studies the red dots on your skin from ingrown hairs. She yells at you to lie on her sari, yells at you to take off your shoes, yells at you to eat more chapati. She brings you to her home across the river where five water buffalo are resting, and paints your toenails with a bottle of pink nail polish she stores in the thatched roof, next to her hair brush and perfume.

She makes you chai using dried buffalo droppings for fire as it gets dark. You understand each other like the river understands the sand. You hold hands and whistle while crossing the water, passing the occasional kneecap or pelvis lodged in the dirt. She walks you halfway across the river, halfway between her home and the nunnery, then leaves you to make the rest of the journey alone.
The neem tree

The nunnery lies on an acre lot, with the river to one side, a road to the other, and monasteries on the flanks. These properties are valuable. They sit against the river the Buddha crossed before attaining enlightenment, so it is considered great merit to conduct Dharma activities at its edge: desirable real estate in the Buddhist world. Each morning, before the sun, you wake up to the Korean monks next door chanting “Namo Buddha,” broadcasted through a speaker on their roof. Last year, Choolu bought the nuns a speaker too, so that their voices could be heard alongside the monks’. Choolu wants their prayers to be the loudest in the city, yet the nuns are humble and regularly “forget” to turn on the speaker. They chant atop foam pads on the floor, cross-legged and in two rows that face each other. They rock back and forth as they pray—a sea of pure red, a plea for peace and liberation. Sunrise and sunset every day, they are chanting.

Rather than a Bodhi tree, the nunnery has a Neem tree. The neem tree stands tall and all-seeing at the center of the land, with several plastic chairs and a block of cement suitable for resting at her base. Various gatherings can be found beneath the tree: Choolu and his friends leaning against their motorcycles, Malu and Lahesh relaxing with the dogs or brushing their teeth with the twigs, the nuns eating puffed and fried snacks out of colorful plastic bags. These are the activities the neem tree oversees. Choolu tells you she makes more oxygen than any other tree. “Very good for you,” he says. “Something wrong? Sit beneath neem tree, you will feel better.”

In December, when you are sick, you spend time leaning against her trunk and watching the sun. Choolu passes by one evening and says, “Don’t get enlightenment here.” You ask why. He pauses for a moment and spits tobacco juice on the ground. “Because,” he chuckles, “then they will cut the tree down.”
Bridge

Bodhgaya, dissected by the river, is rendered one by a bridge. She shuffles her cards and gifts the encounters she sees fit— a quarter mile limbo that masquerades as linear. She manipulates space, preorders collisions of every kind… the lethal, the loving, the ones you most want to avoid. All are equal on the bridge. She slows and speeds with vengeance, mocks those who think they have somewhere to be, those of one side or the other.

Butterflies, dragonflies, bags of chips and candy wrappers drop from the bridge like clouds of offerings. The sun is a hot red balloon, melting into the smog, and the lull of car horns never completely fades. The bridge crowns the river, calls you to join in swells at her center only to part once again. She is neither here nor there— the goddess of connection. The goddess of neither, not both.

Sisters, are the river and the bridge. One to hold bodies up while they flitter side to side, the other to usher them home once they realize there’s nowhere to go. Silent sisters, the river and the bridge— silent and patient, in no hurry of their own. Unbeknownst to you, they pick sides for the same team.
Dear Mom,

It’s another full moon, which means I’ve been thinking about you all day.

I made a friend! She doesn’t speak any English, but it doesn’t matter. She makes me realize how little friendship requires. Words get in the way. She found me on the bank of the river, and took me to her house for chai. Now we’re friends. Don’t get me wrong; I wish I could understand her, but something tells me the important stuff gets through anyway. I feel far more than I “know” here... I don’t pretend to have a damn clue what’s going on, but I know I can trust my gut feelings. I guess they’ve gotten me this far.

I’m looking at the moon, just like you taught me to. Would we still call the moon “full” if we could always see it? For it’s always there... always whole. We’re the ones waxing and waning, growing brighter and dimmer, blooming and dying. Maybe we need the full moon to remember we’re full too. Always glorious and complete, in spite of our ever-changing perceptions. Maybe we forget in order to remember what that means.

Tonight, I think the moon is a reminder that everything is already enlightened, in spite of the illusions we see that cloud our view. Maybe it sometimes feels as though the light is hidden from our experience. But, like the moon, it doesn’t mean it’s gone anywhere... where would it go? There’s no elsewhere; no out there... there’s just right now. The light of the cosmos—that’s us. And that light has never dimmed. I guess that means the emptiness of space is us too. Maybe that’s why “together” matter so much more than “apart.” Maybe that’s why we need something to hold on to in the meantime.

The gift you’ve given me is greater than I could ever convey with words. You’re with me every step. Thank you for the light, mama. Pure love,

Your daughter
You are my sunshine

The nuns follow a more rigorous schedule than you thought possible. From dawn until dusk their days are filled with chanting prayers, meditating, memorizing the sutras in Tibetan, attending classes, practicing penmanship, debating, cooking, and cleaning. They take a 30-minute chai break each afternoon, and an hour for each meal.

The schedule is written in English and posted at the top of the stairs. Beneath sleep, scheduled for 10pm, someone has drawn a smiley face with long eyelashes, and written “keep happy”. Wake is scheduled for 4:30am, and they begin chanting by 5am. Every morning you open your eyes to the sound of their voices, amazed by their vigor. Mondays are their only days off.

In response to their incredible work ethic, you begin to make your classes as playful as possible. Singing, dancing, obstacle courses, races and competitions are incorporated into English and math lessons. Saturdays become art and yoga days, which are initially met with a lack of balance that has the nuns falling to the floor in a heap of laughter. Only on one occasion does playtime begin to get a bit out of hand, to which you raise your voice slightly and say “girls, please!” The room goes silent, the nuns look at you and stare. A ten-year-old speaks up: “not girls, ma’am,” she says, firmly– “nuns.” You nod, never to make the mistake again.
Toffee

Three dogs stay on the nunnery’s land. Two are Choolu’s, and one is a wiry, tic-covered orphan who barks at everything that moves. She’s named Toffee; by whom, you’re never told. Abandoned by her previous owner, she has been given a home at the bottom of the nunnery’s pecking order. She is kept, but she is not liked. You throw her chunks of chapati from your doorway, and forge a friendship meal by meal.

One day, Toffee disappears from the back gate. Choolu says it’s because she wants to go have puppies. You argue otherwise; that she has a river to conquer. Most likely, she is dead, and you are both wrong. Toffee reappears weeks later as you are crossing the river to see Guria. Delirious, she hurtles into your leg– days closer to death than her most recent meal. She jumps at your hands, little more than a barrel of ribs, a damaged ear, and bulging veins. Her relief is palpable. How long had Toffee waited, lurking near the gate, uncertain and unable to knock? Such relief: her pendulum swinging vigorously away from panic, desperate for balance. You turn back towards the gate, whispering “good girl” to the Hindi-speaking, floppy-eared, half-starved pogo stick at your side.

Toffee is warmly re-received. The nuns construct a bed for her out of old meditation cushions and a towel. They scrape their leftovers into her rusted food bucket and tuck her in nightly. When Toffee growls, the nuns jump and smack her, but they do not stop taking care of her until Khandro-la visits, along with a swift reminder of the no pets rule. Newly locked out, Toffee now hides at the front gate, where you bring her loaves of white bread and her skinny legs shake. The other street dogs pick up the scent, and Toffee is bullied out of her slices. You adapt to feeding her late at night, when the pack goes seeking mischief in the river. Toffee stays thin, but she stays. Posted by the red gate, a valiant 20lbs, her whole body wagging for white bread.
Denial

Choolu has two motorcycles and a car. His car is white and strikingly clean against the dusty streets of Bodhgaya. The rear windshield boasts the name and birthday of his three-year-old son in customized red decal letters. Choolu is not shy about loving his son the most. “It is normal,” he says, “my wife loves my daughters more, and I have my son.” In spite of all the time you spend with Choolu, you do not know his life, so you do not respond. His daughters, Lakshmi and Durga, are named after goddesses.

One day while driving with Choolu, you pass a Cafe Coffee Day and admit how much you miss coffee. Later that afternoon, the two of you get in an argument beneath the neem tree. Choolu says a wife should never leave her husband’s home, and you walk away from the conversation at once, unequipped to express your indignation with the sentiment. It is not his perspective that bothers you most, but his conviction that this is simply a fact of life, as indisputable as gravity. There will be no further word on the matter.

The next morning you reluctantly pick up his phone call. “Come downstairs,” he says, “I have something for you.” You find him outside, standing beneath the neem tree with a large bag of individually-wrapped Nescafe instant coffee packets—a peace offering he knows you can’t resist. “I have more in the car,” he boasts. You never argue again, finding instead an obstinate silence to drape over that which you cannot, or will not, see in the same light. For all of your cultural and philosophical differences, you always have a cup of chai in common.

When the young nuns learn you have a surplus of instant coffee, a Pandora’s box opens that you are doomed to follow to its exhaustion. They march into your room, arms outstretched and hands cupped, and say “Ma’am, coffee?” with smiles and voices that could pick any lock. They rip the packets open, dump the powder onto their little palms and lick it all off, leaving a
sludgy residue behind. They then wander about touching door handles and books with the instant saliva concoction still warm on their fingers. The coffee consumption quickly grows alarming: they finish whole packets in minutes, and even the three-year-old develops a taste for the practice. Aware that your own lenience is to blame, you put a necessary stop to coffee hour– a repeal they momentarily protest, then forget about by dinner.

Choolu’s wife is 22 years old. The birth of their third child nearly killed her– she was taken by helicopter to a hospital in New Delhi, hemorrhaging blood. Now she is on birth control, as neither of them want to have more children. You ask what she is like. “She is bored,” Choolu shrugs. “But what can you do.” You ask Choolu if he is happy. “I have kids,” he responds, packing his lip with tobacco.
Paani

You learn the word for water is *paani* from Choolu’s son, who points at the river and says “Paani, paaaaani” any time he’s transported across the bridge. When Guria calls you, this is how you know she wants to meet in the river. Sometimes she chatters for minutes before you hear the code word; the one word you can interpret and respond to. She talks in streams—either convinced you can secretly understand her, or in love with the work of her vocal cords. You respond the only way you can. “Paani?” She keeps talking. “*Paani*?” Eventually she repeats it back, and you set out for the river where she is standing just beyond the gate in her red sari, buffalo in tow.

Guria delights in scaring you. She pulls a scorpion-shaped insect from the water and waves it before your face, overjoyed by your discomfort. Cackling, she tosses it back and watches it float downstream. She digs a hole in the dirt until she finds water, then scoops it into her hands to drink. You marvel at that which comes so naturally to her— the way she treats the buffalo, the way she lets the river inside of her. Her ability to drink that which could very well kill you— casually, beautifully. Her strength is born of fluidity; that which is vulnerable is that which can crack. She knows the steps of the river’s dance; has heard the water’s teaching.
Who’s the fairest of them all

There are no mirrors in the nunnery. For a few weeks you check your reflection using your phone: smiling, because you are happy. You are not alone in this practice— the nuns take picture after picture when they have a phone in their hands, amused by the glimpse into another dimension. Yet there is no fussing, no conversation with the images. When the nuns see a reproduction of themselves, they point and laugh. They see not a self, but a goofy joke.

The nuns redefine your understanding of kindness. When you ask them to verbalize why it’s important to meditate, their words come out a bit sticky with translation from Tibetan to Hindi to English. Yet when they act, they act with a selflessness that goes beyond concept. You teach them words, they teach you heart. They move not as individuals, but as a unit: taking care of each other so nobody has to take care of themselves.

There’s an old Buddhist tale of a nun who was walking alone in the forest when a man began to harass her. He attempted to court her, blocked her from going any further and begged to show her the pleasures of the body. He was most fixated on her eyes, insisting they were too beautiful to go to waste. With little pause, she proceeded to pluck them from her skull and drop them in his hands. She then continued on her way, down the path, alone.

When you complain about being harassed in the street, the older nuns tell you they attract similar treatment. Men shout “ani, ani-la!” as they pass, undeterred by their shaved heads and long red robes, perhaps even encouraged by the inaccessibility they represent. Outraged, you ask the nuns how they respond. “With compassion,” they say. “They do this because they are suffering. We must have compassion for them too.”
Bhikkhu

Bhikkhu is an actor. He sings, performs spontaneous monologues, and dances for cars. He keeps you laughing, keeps all attention loosely focused on himself. It is as good for him as the rest of you.

The night you meet, Bhikkhu tells you he works with a theater troupe that does theatrical activism, currently addressing reproductive rights in the poorest villages of the region. He tells you, with a hushed sense of shock, that women must use grass in these villages to catch their blood. Enter Bhikkhu, front and center: whose stage is the world, who cares about menstruation by way of monologue.

You meet every day to drink chai at a small shop where a barking Pomeranian is chained to a pole, and Indian soap operas bleed endlessly from a tube TV. The shop is run by a married couple and their pubescent son, whose round and triumphant belly hangs over a vat of frying oil as he fries treats to sell other children after school. Rather than attend class, he prepares to inherit the shop.

One day while you sip chai, a group of boys walk past, hollering and jeering. It requires no comprehension of Hindi to know what they are saying. When they walk away, Bhikkhu is noticeably upset. “Not about you,” he says, “about people”. He shakes his head—“they call you a prostitute, right in front of you. How can they do this? Say this to someone they don’t know?” He throws his hands into the air, defeated. Unable to respond, you are in a bubble. A bubble with no translator, deaf to the commentary your body provokes. You carry on, silently tied together by a hurt that is not personal, that poses questions answered best alone.
**Haathi**

A young elephant lives on the bank of the river. She shares an unfortunately small space with a camel, and this renders the operation an “animal rescue.” It is not entirely deceitful— the tuskless elephant was taken as a baby from poachers. Bound by a 2-foot chain, she continuously shuffles from side to side: her limbs battering rams to the dirt below her feet. On holidays, she is embellished with bells and tassels, then paraded around town for 50-rupee rides that go toward her food and lodging. Her wide eyes conceal nothing; she shows her pain to anyone willing to look.

At the risk of thoroughly annoying her caretakers, you return again and again, hauling branches of bananas from the market to feed her. The snack is a thrilling spectacle: she lassos the fruit with her trunk and draws it into her mouth, followed by a full spectrum of crunching, slurping, sloshing with speed and intensity. She is raw power, more than capable of breaking the chain around her leg— you ask her caretakers why she doesn’t. They explain that when she was a baby, she wasn’t strong enough to break free, so now she’s convinced she’s incapable of the feat and makes no attempt. The day you visit empty handed, her caretakers jump at the opportunity to ask for a few rupees. She maintains eye contact and rocks back and forth.

Perhaps the elephant shares a story with every woman who’s been trained to believe she cannot break free. Or worse: she knows she can, but has nowhere to go. It is not the chain, but the city that binds her.
River II

The Sadhu who lives in the middle of the river has dark brown dreadlocks down to her hips. She keeps them wrapped in a red cloth on top of her head: grounded, a crown to tether her to the earth. Her home is two shacks, positioned next to a sloped path that descends from the bridge to the river. Funeral processions use this path to see their kin off, one human lighter on the way out. The river where we burn trash; the river where we burn bodies.

The Sadhu tends to a human-sized, ashen statue of Shiva, selectively offering blessings to those who pass by. In the shack closest to the bridge is her bed, cooking stove, and various cloth sacks of possessions. In the shack closest to the river are chickens, a mat for the Sadhu’s sister to lie on and complain, and various supplies for worshipping Shiva. You gather in this shack to smoke hashish, Shiva’s gift to humans. The Sadhu is unpredictable and assertive: she will shout at random, threaten to become violent, then burst into laughter. Pleasure and practice blending, never yielding to the tame.

One evening, she insists on feeding you fish curry. You are brought into the cooking/sleeping shack, and squeezed onto the floor so you can eat straight from the pan. You try to get comfortable, obligated to ingest several mouthfuls before you can excuse yourself. She seems satisfied, silent, nodding occasionally. You bow several times and stand carefully to exit, tiptoeing through a minefield of oil lamps and boiling pots. A swami is asleep in the bed behind you. When you are chastised by Choolu for spending time with the “dirty people” in the middle of the river, a sense of belonging wells up inside of you. What guilt is there in sitting on a straw mat in the sand, worshipping Shiva? The Sadhu doesn’t apologize, her every gesture self-assured. She is sturdy as her statue, wild as the river who swallows all ashes alike—indistinguishable from the sand.
Cows lounge at the mouth of the bridge, lying in heaps where there is the most space. Granted celestial standing, they are at a far lower risk of collision than humans. One evening you cross to buy bananas, and a single white cow has caused traffic to stop dead, stretched across the bridge like a sedated stampede. The cow, unperturbed, walks slowly before the cars with a bored invincibility painted on its face – a boredom capable of stopping traffic.

The next day, you see a white woman in a long skirt skipping along the bridge, touching every cow she passes on its head. You watch in disbelief, ashamed and amused by the strange isolation provoked from this peer through the looking glass. The slogan of your skin is inevitably defined in conjunction with hers, and hers with yours. You co-create a common meaning, isolating and intimate all at once. Between you, a momentary mirror arises like a travelling circus – gone before you can ask too many questions. Does she feel the same assumptions triggered by her pigment? Has she milked it for capital, or worked to reject it? Does she hear men call to her as she touches the cows, or is this strange experience enveloping enough to funnel the car horns as music into her ears?

The cows, grounded and detached, do not react. You begin to realize why they are holy.
Don’t worry, chicken curry

The mud outside of Guria’s house is always damp: earth so fertile you are denser for its touch. It is December, and a baby buffalo has joined the community. She speaks to it Hindi and pulls bugs from its hair, then ties it to the fence next to its mom. She moves on to a scraggly yellow chicken that was purchased that morning at the market. Laughing, she unties its feet and traps it under the basket, letting it go to trap it once again. It is a game that entertains her for a few minutes, no different from painting toenails or calling a friend. The sun is sinking, the sky turning blue-gray and smoky.

Just before dark, Guria rips the chicken’s head off with a few quick yanks. It makes no sound, gently relieved by the end of its prison sentence. She plucks feathers from its corpse with the same care used on the baby buffalo. She finds your squirming hilarious and throws the disembodied head into your lap. Once the bird is clean, she begins to cook it on the mud stove outside, fueled by buffalo poo patties. Several times she asks if you will eat: “Khana chahiye?” You shake your head every time, fully aware that you will wind up with chicken in your belly regardless. You sit together in silence as she cooks, pacified by the space left in the chicken’s absence; the life force that lingers before finding a new assignment.

As expected, minutes later you are belted down by a full plate of chicken curry. You eat while staring at the beak beside your knee, avoiding its eyes in spite of their vacancy. Guria has already moved on to combing her hair.
Dear Mom,

For some reason, being surrounded by conversations I can’t understand gives me permission not to think. I have nothing to contribute, no input. I shake my head “no”, and eventually, it feels as though I never had anything to say to begin with. I remember the time you told me you stopped asking existential questions once you had kids. Maybe we just pass them on like genes, generation to generation. A family tree of questions, the higher branches pushed closer to the sky by the growing roots.

Bhikkhu took me to visit the “other” Bodhi tree. It’s in a Hindu temple, a few miles down the river from the Guria’s house. A man with a henna-dyed moustache (a difficult look to pull off) gave us a tour, claiming that the entire reason the Buddha became enlightened was because he liberated his mother’s karma by coming to this tree. Apparently, all those who visit the spot liberate their mother’s karma instantly, and can proceed toward enlightenment unhindered by karmic rebirth. Imagine that! Do you feel any different now? When we left (after I gave him 20 rupees, which Bhikkhu said was necessary) he called out, “your mother lineage very happy now!” I wonder what grandma thinks about magical trees.

I know it’s not that easy, but I can’t help but hope, just a little, that he’s right… that one quick pilgrimage and the work is done. Mom, you were the first person to teach me about reincarnation, but we never talked about where it ends. What do you think? When does it stop? Do we cycle and cycle forever, or is there a lesson we come to learn? All of this dogma, the prayers, the temples, the ceremonies, the vows, the donations, the offerings… how can it mean everything to some, and nothing to others? Who’s missing the point? Are the answers the same, no matter the questions?
Just visiting

The youngest nun is three years old. Rarely is she put down, instead passed arm to arm: everyone’s baby. She wears a green tank top, pink leggings, and blue crocs. She has robes, but in order to fit them to her tiny torso they must be wrapped around her multiple times; a crimson maypole. By default, she becomes the closest companion of the nunnery’s second youngest inhabitant, a dangerously smart five-year-old. On group outings, pilgrims and tourists approach them, touch their heads, and hand them treats. They’re irresistible—religion turned adorable, a digestible amount of dogma in miniature figures. Little Buddhas, doubtless and free.

Each day after lunch, they come to your room with notebooks and say “ma’am, class?” Class consists mainly of copying the alphabet (the letter q proves most challenging) and singing songs, before they lose interest and you play tag or pick-up sticks with broken colored pencils. When it’s time for exams, the head nuns insist they take one too. Somewhat to your surprise, they both copy the alphabet masterfully, having practiced for an hour each night before bed. You cover their papers in star-shaped stickers, which they joyously show off to the older nuns, then tape to the wall.

When the three-year-old’s mother comes to visit, she cries and clings to her sisters. She hasn’t seen her mom for four months, and is frightened by her arrival—frightened by the face that first beheld her. Mom responds gracefully, certain that she’ll remember their bond with just a bit of time. Once she calms down, the two leave to spend an afternoon touring temples, temporarily reunited as mother and daughter. Now abandoned by her dearest friend, it is the five-year-old’s turn to cry. The community takes turns trying to cheer her up, rallied around the youngest.

Choolu, Lahesh, the cows and the pouting nun, woven into a small, circumstantial tribe, refusing to let each other down. When the time comes for Mom to leave again, neither of them cry.
Khana chahiye

You make pizza on a Sunday. It is discussed for several weeks before it actually happens— a buildup far greater than the meal could ever be. The dough is not difficult, and the tomatoes you have make for a decent sauce. It is the canned cheese that complicates your efforts: a closer cousin to rubber than dairy. Still, everything cooks, the kitchen is obliterated, and a semblance of pizza emerges. The young nuns chase each other with slices, shouting “You are my daughter, you must eat!” They link hands, spinning and spinning, a nebula of flour on a Sunday afternoon.

The nuns eat every meal together in a rectangular formation on the floor, seated on cushions. They pass green chilies around after everyone is served, which you do not dare touch. They offer you everything at least twice, no matter if you decline the first time.

The oldest nun is thirty, though she comes to class with the ten-year-olds due to a head injury incurred from a fallen tree branch. She is sweetness unrelenting, her touch rough with a love too vast for her funnels, forced to emerge in bursts. You sit next to each other every night at dinner. One evening, she holds the jar of salt and grabs your elbow, waiting patiently for words to trickle from her brain into her throat. “Are you salt?” she suddenly asks, thrusting it in your direction. The room explodes in laughter. Realizing the success of her blunder, she picks up the water pitcher and says “Are you water?” The nuns howl. You smile and reach for the water pitcher, for the water you cannot drink.

She is not wrong, though. You are salt, you are water. You are poking at boundaries, uncovering a common definition . You are closer to each other each day, but each day closer to the day you must part– a reality that pushes to the forefront of your mind like a weed amongst flowers. You savor every bite.
Strange magic

On the train to Varanasi, you sit on the top bunk beneath the luggage rack, thigh to thigh with many men who argue over the translation in your *Pocket Guide to Hindi*. Is it a goat or a deer? You never come to a full resolution. At every stop, vendors roam the aisles with peanuts, bananas, chai, bottled water. You buy a cluster of bananas and begin to accumulate a small pile of peels, unsure of how to dispose of them. Eventually the man across from you gets tired of the sight and begins to throw them out the window.

At one stop, several exquisitely made-up women get on the train and begin to harass everyone for money. They make fun of the men, even shoving them a bit. They have broad shoulders and deep voices, their saris concealing unknowns you have no need to question. You wonder if there is any danger, if these women are robbing the train, but everyone seems resolved to give them ten or twenty rupees and they carry on. One taps your knee, and hesitates for a moment before opening her palm. You give her ten rupees, and do not break eye contact. There is a fierce vulnerability; a wild uncertainty shared in your gazes. You say, *I do not know what I am doing, but I will not be a victim. I will not be pushed around. I will make this work for me.*

Community can last for but an instant. You are mesmerized as she walks away, stuffing her chest with the change.

Once the women are gone, the man next to you tries his best to explain. “They are gay,” he says, “they can curse if you don’t give money.” Given the difficulty had sorting out the distinction between goat and deer, you nod and ask no questions. In your heart, a fist is raised for their ferocity. May their sorcery continue to invert society, even just for a moment, shaking change loose from its pockets.
One rupee

At the gate of the largest temple, a band of three small Buddhas hop about harassing the line for “one rupee? One rupee, miss?” Collectively they are at most four feet tall, the littlest doomed to scramble behind his two comrades. The leader is a girl, perhaps seven years old, and the other two boys. She often scoops the smallest into her arms and walks for the both of them, tired if his lagging behind. They parade across blocks and pipes awaiting construction, in front of a sign that asks tourists to refrain from giving children money and encourage them to go to school. Every time you glance at the trio they are eating a new treat, pockets full of snacks and money from the guilty tourists. Far wealthier than her peers in the classroom, the girl looks wildly proud of herself. You have a strong feeling she will do well in this life.

Meanwhile, a grown man with a cage full of house finches offers to release one for one hundred rupees. For the equivalent of $1.75 USD, you can watch a man let a half-dead bird out of a cage to catch it again moments later, so long as you don’t turn your back. One morning an older white woman lectures him about the negative karma he is accumulating for profiting from the birds’ suffering. She tries to reason with him to let the creatures go. He nods his head and says “yes, ma’am,” looking ashamed, but he does not open the cage. She walks away from the intervention satisfied, perhaps even convinced she’s changed his mind. Once she is out of sight, he purchases a cup of chai and takes his business to the temple down the road.
The road home

The nunnery has two entrances: one through the river, and one through the dirt road on the other side. The river is preferable for her solitude, but it’s safer and more convenient to use the road. On the walk from the nunnery to the bridge, you pass a handful of monasteries, a half-built and fully-operating hospital, a chai shop, a Chow Mein tent, a tailor, and several small shops that sell plastic bracelets and bindis.

Over time, you come to make friends with the owners of a stand that carries the essentials: variations of fried snacks, hair gel and razors. They are a small family, just a husband and wife, and their 20-year-old son named Ajit. His mother’s name is Sunita. You forget his father’s name and can’t work up the courage to ask again, hoping he never notices you neglect to call him by name when he calls out to you from his motorcycle.

Sunita is strong and lovely, her hip-length brown hair kept in a well-oiled bun at the base of her skull. Each time you pass, she demands you sit on the green bench in front of her stand, and fills your palms with sugar balls and roasted dal whenever you attempt to leave. She takes you to her home, where you help milk the family water buffalo to make chai. She paints your nails and forces plastic bracelets onto your wrists for weeks, and only when she starts placing red bindis on your forehead does Choolu warn she is grooming you to marry her son.

In December, the family has you shampoo their buffalo in front of the store, and several onlookers emerge from the surrounding storefronts for the free show. You don’t think much of the spectacle—water buffaloes are the most docile creatures you’ve ever encountered, and the activity seems to go smoothly. It takes five Pantene packets to get her sudsy, and she glistens under the hose for a moment before lying down and returning to the dirt. For the following week, people shout “buffalo bath!” as you pass by, even on the other side of the bridge.
Your final evening in Bodhgaya, you spend an hour with Sunita and her family sitting on their green bench. She buys two plastic bags full of toe rings, nail polish, and hair clips to give you the most elaborate makeover yet—so you can leave looking like “princess.” You take a family photo. She has placed a ring on every toe, and they cut you on the walk back, just enough to leave a bit of blood on the road. The following morning at the train station, awaiting a train to Calcutta that never comes, you smash the plastic bangles on the concrete one by one—the only way to get them off.
Sadhu Sadhu

That which she could not learn from the river, she has learned from Shiva. She earned her relationship to ash by training within the flames, and can be burned no longer. It settles on her fingertips so that every touch bears the mark of return.

In order to ferry souls across the river, she must be ferocious. She growls and snarls in the face of wayward spirits. To dwell between the shores, she must subdue that which wanders. Yet she lives amidst the peace of settled flesh, knows the quiet of a hissing ember— a life of sending bodies to the wind.

When she looks at you, she looks into your common form— to the dust you will amount to. She sees beyond the flesh you cannot keep. Not for love, but for respect. To be seen in this light is the greatest kindness you can be afforded.

Her community maintains their distance, leaving a wide breadth when they cross the sand. She moves fearlessly and purposefully; intimidating from afar. Yet, if you look closely, you will see the tenderness with which she stomps out the coals— mother to those who must travel back to the ocean.
Relations

Guria and you hold hands everywhere you go. If it gets too sweaty, you switch hands. You do not let go. Guria fixes your headscarf and shoves her phone into your ear. She wants you to talk to all of her boyfriends, to say “hello friend!” and make them laugh, make them picture her smiling. You abide most every time.

Guria has a husband, but you never meet him. She asks if you have a husband. Nehi, you shake your head. She asks if you want a boyfriend: “ladka chahiye?” You shake your head. She asks if you want a girlfriend: “ladki chahiye?” You shake your head. She asks if you want her: you pause, unsure. You giggle. “Aap mere dost hain!” You squeeze her hand. You are my friend.

You and Guria share all the expenses of your excursions: the Ferris wheel, the veggie burgers, the staged photos you have taken in front of a fake barn by a suspiciously young “professional photographer.” She wants only to play, only to laugh– she says, “aap khush hain, me bhi khush hoon.” You’re happy, I’m happy. You say it back. One evening she yells at her brother for asking you for money– the only time the play within her eyes disappears.

Hailing from opposite sides of the river, you and Guria begin to meet at the Sadhu’s house, staying for a cup of tea before climbing on to the bridge for a walk. Slowly, she begins asking Guria for help. Just with candles and incense at first, to get comfortable with the fire. Guria accepts the responsibility, and you watch as she takes the role more seriously with each passing day. You wonder if she knows that the flicker in her eyes is becoming a flame.

When it is time to say goodbye, you part ways on the middle of the bridge. Letting go of each other’s hands for the last time, you watch as she walks down the sandy path, quietly bowing her head to step through the doorway of the shack.
River III

Stand in the river and ask her how she kills. She is chocolate milk mud and rolls over herself in small peaks: fluid, faster than we think she is. We misunderstand her nature yet abide by her law– it is not personal. Flood or drought; none of it is personal. The river does not know us, does not see us. She knows the course of her waters.

There is a bank for shitting and a bank for praying, a bank for meeting late at night and a bank for washing early in the morning. We scramble around her, knowing not one way to bow, not one way to worship. We try our hands at each. She receives without complaint, gives without expectation. The soul she possesses is not the soul shared by flesh: she is unbiased. Unwavering. Uncoded. Her savagery, balance. Her judgement, truth.

Like the river, death is not personal. She gives and receives all at once– whispers peace of burning bones. Perhaps this is why we send our dead to the river. She tells a story of channels, of cycles. The Goddess of liminal space– if we are to awaken, it is within her bounds.

To awaken the feminine is to awaken the divine.